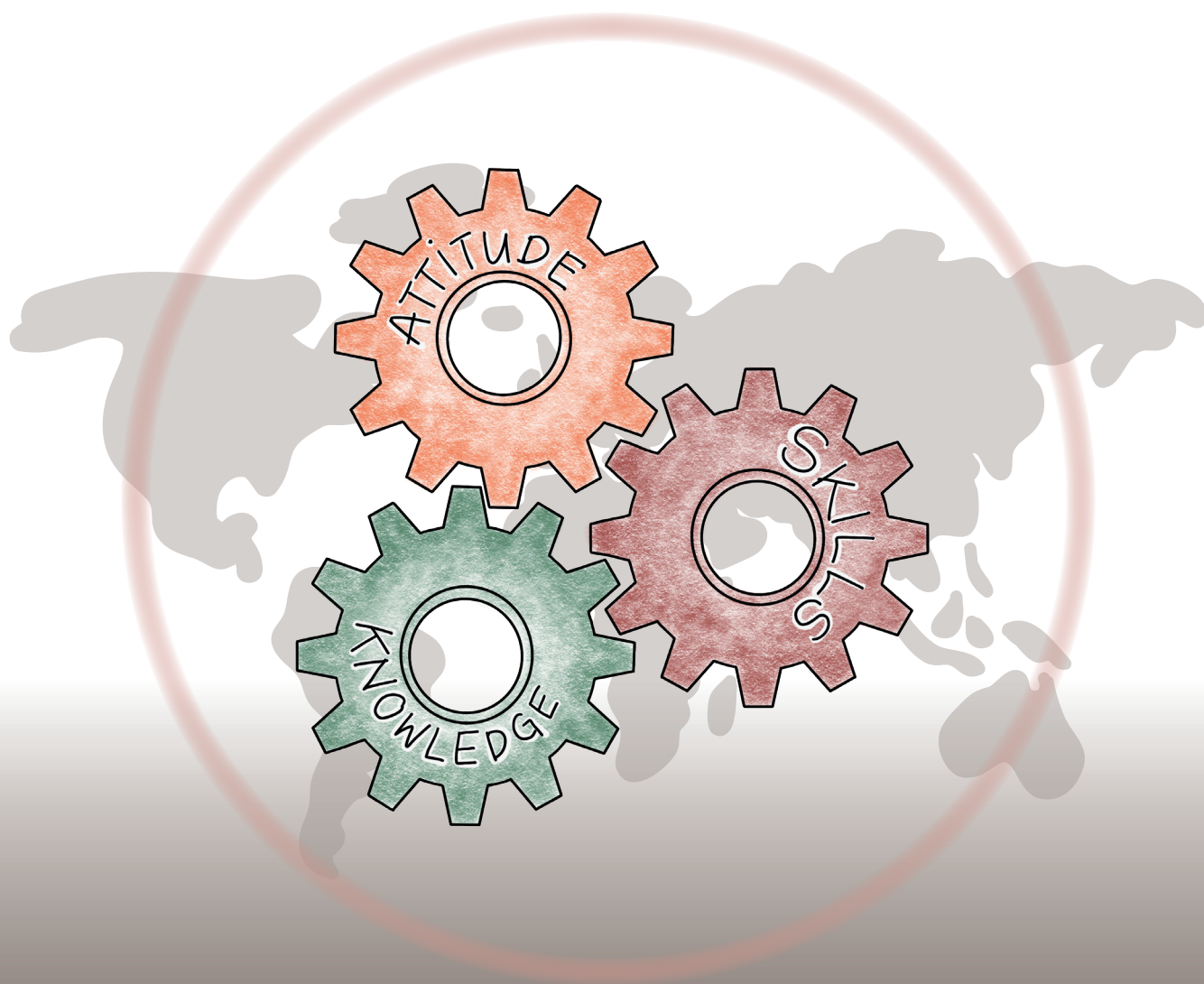# Future trends and competencies for the Swiss international cooperation sector

Recommendations for professionals

The following summary of the **joint cinfo and Nadel 2022 trends and competencies study** provides recommendations for professionals active in the international cooperation sector.

cinfo

The Swiss Centre of Competence for International Cooperation

ETH zürich
NADEL
Center for Development and Cooperation

ANALYSIS OF TRENDS AND COMPETENCIES RELEVANT TO IC IN THE FUTURE

Context

The international cooperation (IC) sector is dynamic and challenges professionals in terms of lifelong learning. Like all of society, the IC sector is experiencing changes, and as a result, the required competencies for practitioners are shifting. Subject-specific competencies are not enough to work in an increasingly complex world. Integrating and fostering method-specific, social and personal competencies into the learning journeys (work, further education) of development professionals can help them acquire and deploy their subject-specific competencies to their best ability, at work and in society.

Goal

The study aimed to analyse, in a Swiss context, which competencies will be important to respond to the needs of the IC sector in the future, focusing on the year 2030. To achieve this, the study explored:

- **emerging trends** specific to the IC sector

- the top **competencies** needed in light of these trends

- ways to **develop these competencies**, challenges, and related recommendations

Methodology

The findings are based on literature, a survey of 230 predominantly Swiss IC professionals, and 19 key informants – specialists for IC topics with different backgrounds. This study is based on a competencies framework that embraces the integration of skills, knowledge and attitudes.

How to define competencies?

Literature is broad regarding the definition of competencies. The "traditional" and simplistic concept of defining competencies as skills is being replaced with a more comprehensive view.

Competence, as understood here, comprises integrated pieces of **knowledge**, **skills** and **attitudes** and is assumed to be a prerequisite for adequate functioning on the job.

- **knowledge** reflects thematic expertise (what we know)

- **skills** reflect "abilities" or "capabilities" (how we use what we know)

- **attitudes** refer to predispositions or personality traits (how we engage in the world), which matter in terms of whether a person will effectively put their knowledge and skills into practice.
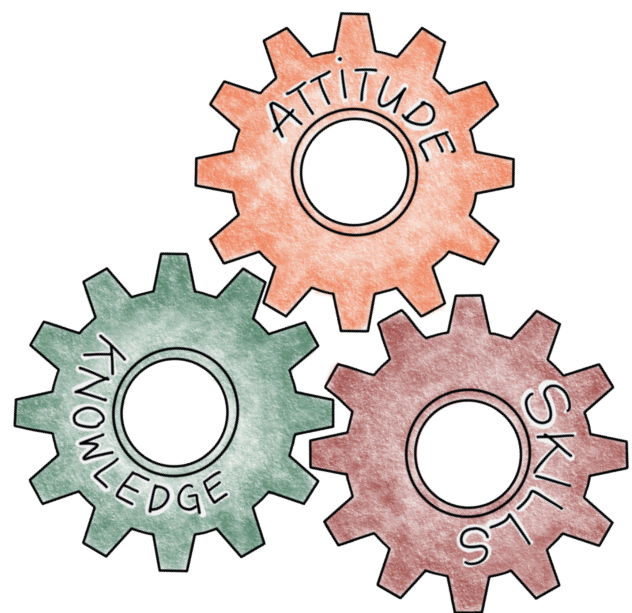
Main trends impacting IC

For the most part, a broad consistency between survey respondents, key informants, and literature regarding the most important trends for IC for the year 2030 was observed.

The following trends were considered to be of most importance:

- **Climate change**
- **Human displacement and migration**
- **Water scarcity**
- **Nexus (peace, humanitarian and development)**
- **Increasing inequalities**
- **Fragility**
- **Digitalisation and technological change**

The key informants also rated **Collaboration with the private sector** and **Localisation/decolonisation**, or a fundamental shift in the relationship between the Global North and Global South, as important trends.

Some of those trends relate to specific thematic issues that the sector will need to adjust to, such as climate change, digitalisation or water scarcity. Others relate to a fundamental shift in the relationship between actors and the foundations of the sector to date.

Several of these trends have implications for competencies.

Competencies gaining importance in the future

In light of these trends, the following competencies were considered the most important for 2030:

- **Collaboration, cooperation and teamwork** – linked to the proliferation of new actors, including private sector actors, as well as localisation of the IC sector

- **Adaptability and flexibility** – linked to trends, including nexus-based approaches based on growing interlinkages between development, humanitarian and peace work

- **Systems thinking** – linked to (geo-)political considerations and the systemic issues of climate change, water scarcity, migration and conflict

- **Critical thinking** – related to the trend of localisation of the IC sector, and the broader perceived need to reflect on approaches more critically

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS (EMPLOYEES / FUTURE APPLICANTS)

Experienced professionals

- The transferability of **experience in/exposure to different contexts**, as it triggers an interest in learning from these experiences, **can create incentives to continue learning**, to be open to new ideas and to "see things differently". Professionals should acknowledge this and make the most of it.

- According to key informants, professionals should improve self-management by "not only delegating tasks, but keeping their own responsibility, and acting as mentors to younger professionals"

- Further, experienced professionals should consider combining **further education** with work to address the perceived lack of thematic subject matter knowledge on newer topics.

- In order to optimise their learning needs, they should also **keep reflecting on their own qualities / attitudes:** "To be able to do so and to be motivated to do so, the role and purpose of competences have to be taken more seriously."

- A way to address the fear of change (fear of becoming less important as a result of change), experienced practitioners should pro-actively **develop within their respective organisations**, for instance, by using opportunities – where available – such as "in-house trainings, short duration coaching, paid further education / external training, peer to peer learning (self-learning, then come together, learn from each other and discuss etc.), as well as systematic mentoring (across countries)."

New professionals

- Research shows that young professionals **not only need to develop skills, but also attitudes** such as the willingness to apply them in practice. They should seek ways to **challenge themselves**, seek to **network** purposefully, and seek a **mentor** as early as possible.

- They should also strive for **experiential learning / on the job training:** "do not take only classroom learning but rather seize opportunities of learning by doing, on the job training."

- New professionals can seek practical experience including through volunteering, joining social movements, approaching NGO, seeking intercultural exchange, travel, and **trying to work in different roles and settings** early in their career.

- Further, young professionals need to **embrace the importance of competencies**, and differentiate between knowledge, skills and attitudes.

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For both experienced and newer professionals

■ Considering the blurring lines between Global North and South, the localisation of IC, and the proliferation of new actors such as the private sector, "IC practitioners will have to prepare for **shifting their skills** from working in the Global South to working in the Global North for instance by changing policy making through advocacy work."

■ In a similar vein, several key informants referred to the increasing importance of inner development and sustainability and their interplay, including for example critical thinking, humility, and self-awareness: "If you take the SDGs seriously you cannot not **work on yourself as individual** on a daily basis in the sense of inner development goals (IDGs)."

■ Practitioners should regularly ask themselves: Why do I do what I do? Such self-reflective approach contributes to **expectations management**, and it helps apprehend **which competencies are needed** for one's personal and professional development. In this sense, it facilitates identifying existing and lacking competencies, and seeking specific ways to address them.

■ In order to stay and/or become competent, it can be helpful to **seek exposure to different contexts** (countries, cultures, organisations, etc.): "It is helpful when people have worked in different roles and settings, as it makes people more aware of different perspectives, in that sense more open-minded. People sometimes live in their own world and sector."

TRENDS & COMPETENCIES

CONCLUSION

cinfo and Nadel's study on trends and competencies indicates that the emerging trends for the sector require revised, or even new mental models and approaches, and a "new set" of competencies, including not only knowledge and skills, but also **specific attitudes at the level of reflection** on action, meta-cognition, critical self-reflection, or introspection. Many of the top-ranked competencies also echo literature on '21st-century skills' or 'future skills', such as critical thinking, systems thinking, adaptability and flexibility, collaboration and cooperation, creative thinking and innovation, self-awareness and self-reflection, and complex problem-solving which are seen as competencies needed to deal with volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, all of which are highly accentuated in the IC sector.

There is increasing recognition that attitudes can be acquired, especially if opportunities, particularly time, combined with the right mechanisms are provided to deal with complex tasks. Despite this growing recognition, barriers remain. Many of the perceived key challenges and responses revolve around how competencies are perceived, discussed, valued and approached in theory and practice.

Key barriers include organisational cultures that inhibit or undervalue learning, the unsystematic approach to fostering competencies, the lack of time or resources, the lack of relevant practice-oriented learning opportunities provided by training institutes and employers, and the lack of time to seize the few existing learning opportunities.

cinfo ௸

Rue Centrale 115
2503 Bienne
+41 (0)32 365 80 02
info@cinfo.ch
www.cinfo.ch

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On behalf of the Swiss Confederation and in
collaboration with the main organisations in the sector.