

# Civil Society Organisations in Switzerland

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## HELVETAS Swiss Inter-cooperation and civil society

### A Few General Considerations

What is civil society? It is not easy to define as the term is rather vague and there is no clear definition. Basically it is a large space between the State and private households. This means that civil society organisations (CSOs) represent only one specific element of civil society, i.e. the more organised and formal one, having a legal status. Besides CSOs there are, as is the case in Switzerland, a lot of informal gatherings, movements, groups of interest, like-minded persons for very different interests. They make civil society a large open space for all sorts of groups.

The strength of civil society in a country depends on a number of factors such as tradition, governance, political system, institutional environment, culture of participation, preparedness of the people to invest their time for common good, preparedness of the government to share and delegate responsibilities and to leave open space, level of education, political vision and will etc. CSOs are not a homogenous group. There are many different activities, interests, values, visions, convictions, open and hidden interests. Between purely technical service deliveries, a humanitarian organisation, an advocacy oriented institution, or a voluntary sports association there may be profound differences in outlook, behaviour, policies, and relationships. Depending on felt urgencies, situations, and needs CSOs will also fulfil different roles and responsibilities.

### Civil Society in Switzerland

Switzerland has a highly developed and diverse civil society. It is estimated that there are about 100,000 associations with legal status in Switzerland. A majority of them are rooted in the local community and municipality. They provide services, activities, local integration, and advances the togetherness of people. They bring people together with common interests and organise their representation. They promote community and leisure activities and they take responsibilities for common duties – sometimes with an official mandate. With their mostly unpaid work they invest their time, money, and energy for other people and organisations, for initiatives, for community work, for the promotion of their hobbies and interests. The range of their interests and the possible forms of voluntary work extend from sports associations to voluntary work in the social, health or cultural arenas, to the acceptance of political

duties (mainly at the municipal level), to self-help among neighbours. The variety of activities and their extent shows that this voluntary commitment is an important contribution to “social cohesion” which holds together society.

Approximately 1.8 million volunteers (out of a population of 8 million) participate in organisations and over 800,000 persons fulfil voluntary services of responsibility in associations, communities, and municipalities. Eighty percent of the voluntary commitment takes place at the local level. Voluntary and civil society work in Switzerland are often considered complementary to government services and as desirable services for the society. Depending on their activity CSOs may receive government subsidies for their work. Most of these organisations are relatively small and financed through membership fees, voluntary donations, and function with the time spent by their members. Internationally Switzerland takes a top-position in the area of voluntary commitment and involvement of its citizens and of voluntary financial donations. In Switzerland contributions of civil society to the functioning of the society as a whole are considerable. A Swiss citizen is often member of a number of different civil society organisations.

## **A High Commitment for Civil Society in Switzerland**

Explanations for this high commitment can be found in specific historical and social traditions. Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Switzerland was a poor country with limited resources, a difficult agricultural environment, harsh climatic conditions in the mountains, the risks of natural disasters, and difficult living conditions. This brought people together to invest in their common infrastructure and in self-help. The principle of subsidiarity (solve problems at lower levels where they occur and where they are best solved) is a cultural and institutional pillar of self-organisation for the society and supports solving issues outside government through voluntary associations. This is anchored in the deep-rooted federalism (the country was built up from below) of the Swiss governmental system.

Decision-making at the local level and active participation possibilities create interest and commitment of citizens. It is their responsibility and they care about their local schools, water supplies, rural roads, municipal administration etc.. Elements of “direct democracy” (direct participation of citizens in public affairs through votes and elections etc.) are very strong in Switzerland. Associations are considered “schools in democracy” (discussions of different opinions, listening to arguments, working together, searching for compromise etc), which promote solidarity, tolerance, and respect for minorities. Sports associations are very widespread and count for most of the above mentioned members (30%), followed by churches (20%) and specific interest groups (20%), cultural organisations (13%) and social organisations (13%), political parties and functions (11%), youth organisations (7%) and so on. This multitude of civil society organisations was created bottom-up by the initiative of interested persons and not by government. But government works closely together with civil society in a number of sectors.

There are signs that this civil society commitment has decreased over the last decades. Membership numbers in associations stagnate and younger people especially show less interest. This is due to changes such as stronger individualism, many different distractions and alternatives, and more informal groups which do not appear in statistics. It is easier to interest and organise young people on an ad hoc basis, for a limited time and for issues which may change over time. This is part of a deeper change in our society. A new trend is opportunities offered by the social media which are increasing rapidly (Facebook groups, Internet counselling, short-term changing interests etc).

Associations in all the different areas and institutional varieties have played an important part in the development of Switzerland and there are reasons why it is desirable that they will continue to play an important role:

- As in other countries, society and the economy are under the influence of globalisation but people need all the more local institutions with which they can identify, where they feel at home, where they can have meaningful activities, where they are linked to other people and where they can act together.
- Associations can assume activities which the State will not, should not, or cannot take up or extend (cost involved, private initiative more efficient or adapted to the situation, interesting complementarities), but which are important for the quality of life.
- The present political system of large autonomy of municipalities and of subsidiarity is well anchored in the population and leads to a strong interest in public affairs. It is cost efficient close to the citizen, and transparent which creates trust.

Studies show that, in Switzerland, contributions of civil society to the functioning of the society as a whole are considerable. Especially at the local level the close cooperation between municipalities and civil society associations in sports, culture, youth, social fields, nature protection, prevention, etc lead to efficient, low cost, and high quality solutions.

Why do people participate actively in civil society organisations? The Swiss review “The Month” gives an answer in its October 2015 edition:

“People want to be committed and want to co-determine society. Besides the state, the market, and the family we need civil society which is, since many years, an engine for innovation and change in society. To use and develop this potential also in future on a partnership basis is one of the big challenges of our country in the next 20 years to come” (translation from German).

Is the civil society set-up then an export article from Switzerland to other countries? There is a need for caution. What works more or less in Switzerland is not necessarily a model for countries with different conditions. It is also very much a question of attitudes and values of citizens and their perception of the State and its functions. Already in European countries perceptions vary considerably. What is interesting is that there is no direct government policy in Switzerland to promote civil society as such, but there is very close cooperation in many fields and subsidies for a number of implementation tasks. This cooperation has developed over time and also changes over time with changing needs. CSOs are normally tax-exempt (subject to their non-profit status and donors can deduct their contributions from taxes) and some facilitation can take place at the local level. Depending on their legal status (association, foundation, cooperative, among others), they are governed by laws, rules and regulations) which prescribe a number of conditions for their functioning.

## **HELVETAS and Civil Society**

HELVETAS is an example of a civil society organisation with a large operational programme, an advocacy role, a considerable membership base and many sponsors and a close cooperation with government. It is a public association under Swiss law. Its activities are concentrated in development support to partners in countries in the South and East. Founded in 1955 by a number of activists who wanted to support the countries in the south in their development their vision was to create a better and peaceful world. With voluntary financial donations of the Swiss population they started small programmes. Today HELVETAS has 40,000 members and 100,000 regular donors, and collects approximately, 30 million Swiss francs a year from different sources (members, individual donors, foundations, church groups, municipalities, private enterprises, among others).

HELVETAS receives additional mandates for project implementation from various sources and donors due to its professional development know-how. It is by far the largest Swiss development organisation and its vision is “a just world in which all men and women determine the course of their lives in dignity and security, using environmental resources in sustainable manner”. Today priority is on rural economy, rural infrastructure, environment and climate change, skills development and education, governance, and peace. Gender issues and social equity are important transversal subjects as well as knowledge sharing and capacity building with partners. Priority of HELVETAS is to promote its local partners and to support them in their own development. Its role is professional support and advice, development issues, training and coaching, finance and institutional development, monitoring, evaluation and quality control. Soft factors have become more important such as inclusion, empowerment, participation, multi stakeholder approach, institution building, change processes, enabling environment. Poverty reduction and support to poor and marginalised groups remain the main focus in these fields.

Civil society plays an important role in the development approach of HELVETAS.

We are convinced that sustainable long-term development is possible only if different actors of a society are active and creative partners and work together. But what is an enabling environment for civil society? HELVETAS overall objective is to promote and expand the space for civil society actors at the international level, in Switzerland, and in its support programmes for development at the country level.

Civil society is closely linked to democracy and participation. CSOs provide citizens the opportunity to gain, gather, hold and exchange information to participate in shaping development policies and partnerships, to initiate and oversee the implementation of these policies, and to claim their legitimate rights as citizens. For many decades CSOs have defended the rights especially of vulnerable people. In the 1990s this has led to a gradual widening of the political space in many countries. However, since around 2010, civil society has observed an opposite trend. In a number of countries there are increasing efforts by governments to restrict citizen's engagement and CSO operations. At the same time, Western governments and donor agencies have increasingly acknowledged CSOs as development actors in their own right, with a high professional and development potential.

How does HELVETAS promote civil society in its support programmes at the concrete level of activities? The inclusion of civil society actors for implementation is important and an objective in itself. Possibilities and potential will naturally vary from situation to situation with changing contexts. Country programmes will map out how CSOs are already participating in specific projects and discuss possibilities for further engagement. But HELVETAS also has Civil Society Flagship Projects. These are support programmes which are specifically focused towards the promotion of civil society and receive a coordinated and in-depth support from HELVETAS' specialised advisors. HELVETAS closely cooperates with strategic partners in the country, supports CSO networks and platforms, and promotes dialogue with national and local government institutions.

## **HELVETAS in Bhutan**

HELVETAS started its work in Bhutan in 1975 and, with the support of the government of Switzerland, we soon became an important development partner in forestry, agriculture, education, suspension bridges, among others. Later, good governance, decentralisation and civil society engagement were added. HELVETAS had the privilege to play an important role as a partner of Bhutan in its development and this in a period of important transition. The expansion of education in the last 30 years has completely changed expectations between younger and well-educated generations and their parents in rural areas. In these dynamic times of change the emergence of actors of civil society is of high importance for shaping the future society and its institutions in Bhutan.

In Bhutan our main partner in development support has been the government and its administration which saw a rapid growth in the last decades. Coming from

a feudal past, developing into a constitutional Monarchy, and making enormous strides towards modernisation, the country had to build an administration from scratch. Civil society was not known as a concept; there was a well-knit society based on feudal values and traditions. There was certain mistrust against this new concept. Civil society was known mainly under the label of NGOs (non-governmental organisations), a rather vague notion which could summarize many different organisations with very different objectives and contents. It was in the last 10 years, together with the constitutional changes, that the administrative and legal basis was laid which permitted the formal creation of civil society organisations in Bhutan.

But informal groups and associations existed in the society before and have their roots mainly in traditions where members come together for practical purposes such as maintaining common infrastructure like temples, or governing common natural resources like pastureland and water, and providing support in times of social and economic needs. This is very similar to the situation in rural societies in Switzerland in former times. HELVETAS has supported, directly or indirectly, the creation of social groups in its different programmes even if this was not known as civil society promotion. The Participatory Forest Management Project is a good example of the promotion of cooperation between the rural population and the government so that forests are managed by users in a sustainable way. In fact there are under different chapters in Bhutan, a number of different groups centred on an economic or social activity (in agriculture, livestock, water associations, forestry user groups etc).

The creation of the civil society organisation (CSO) Act in 2007 and the establishment of the Civil Society Organisation Authority (CSOA) in 2009 was a turning point for civil society in Bhutan. It meant that civil society organisations could register officially and acquire a legal status. But they are still in the early years of development. Their roles are still seen mainly in charity and service delivery. As they are still young with limited experience they also face internal governance challenges and financial sustainability questions. Community based organisations and informal groups still have to build up if they want to become strong community participation organisations.

## **HELVETAS Supports Civil Society in Bhutan**

Based on this new legal basis and with opportunities and challenges in mind, HELVETAS started to work more intensely with the emerging civil society groups in Bhutan from 2009. The initial model was to work with individual CSOs in order to benefit vulnerable sections of the population that these CSOs reached. As an example HELVETAS partnered in 2005 with Tarayana Foundation, one of the earliest formal CSOs, to start rural livelihood programmes in remote communities in the south and east of the country. As the number of CSOs grew, this modality changed. HELVETAS began to look at CSOs as important actors in their own right rather than being only implementing partners. Therefore in 2011, a project was started with the aim to build the capacity of CSOs in priority areas of common interest, complemented by small-scale start-up grants for

new CSOs. In parallel, support was provided for the newly created institutions (CSOA and Secretariat) responsible for policy support and registration of CSOs.

After three years a second phase was begun (2015-2017) to continue capacity development as well as to bring in new dimensions such as the promotion of networking among the increasing numbers of diverse CSOs and policy support for a favourable environment for the continued growth of CSOs. By their nature such processes are long-term and require a step-by-step approach. Therefore the support that will now come from the EU for civil society in Bhutan is important. This three to five year project will be implemented through HELVETAS in close partnership with CSOs, the CSO Authority and Secretariat, and relevant partners from the State.

The project not only builds on what HELVETAS has started in the past but adds important governance and sustainability dimensions through:

- Grant funds to promote civil society engagement in sustainable development
- Good governance
- Capacity development of civil society organisations
- Promoting enabling environment for civil society in Bhutan

HELVETAS sees for itself an important bridging function between civil society and government in order to create spaces for dialogue and to improve mutual understanding. The aim is to support the building of strong constituencies and legitimacy and to make CSOs responsible for building their own future. They should also get the necessary space to develop and assume their role and responsibilities as important actors of the society. This is how CSOs can contribute to a strong society.