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Swiss solidarity faces an acid test

Switzerland has constructed bridges in Nepal, supported educational campaigns in Burkina Faso, provided clean drinking water in Haiti and helped to cultivate more resistant varieties of corn in Mozambique. Swiss development aid has contributed more to the image of a humanitarian, benevolent Switzerland over the past 50 years than virtually any other government activity. But Swiss solidarity now faces an acid test.

By Marc Lettau

A filigree suspension bridge sways in the wind at a dizzying height above the melting Trift glacier in the Bernese Oberland. Depending on the weather conditions, the crossing is not for the faint-hearted. This is just one of a whole series of new suspension bridges providing for thrills and adrenaline kicks in the alpine region. The fact that Swiss development aid workers have been building similar bridges in Nepal for over 50 years is often forgotten. Around 3,000 bridges have been built there but never to provide adrenaline rushes. The bridges connect people on one side of the valley with those on the other. They shorten routes, foster exchange, enable development and contribute to greater prosperity.

Expression of openness and compassion

There is much talk in Switzerland this year of bridges that overcome great divides as the nation looks back on 50 years of development aid. However, this is more of an opportunity for reflection than celebration as global poverty has not been eradicated despite half a century of extensive aid efforts by wealthy industrial nations. That said, Switzerland's decision in 1961 to provide development aid is a cause for celebration.

The states granted independence in the southern regions of the world after the Second World War were heavily dependent on aid because they had previously been exploited by colonial powers that had impeded their development. But Switzerland was not a colonial power and therefore not plagued by a bad conscience. The decision to contribute to the rebuilding of shattered states was therefore primarily an expression of general compassion and of the increasing openness of the nation. It is not least thanks to its development aid that Switzerland is today regarded as an open, empathetic state that

wants to do what it can to help solve global problems.

No idealisation of the beginnings

However, the state moved less quickly than many of its citizens, who set up civil and church-run aid organisations. Modern-day Helvetas was founded in 1955. Swiss Interchurch Aid (HEKS) commenced its work in 1956. It was not until 1961 that state development aid embraced larger-scale activities. There have been many "fundamental changes" since then, explains Martin Dahinden, Director of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in an interview with "Swiss Review". Switzerland initially operated on a local scale. It has since recognised "that little can be achieved at local level if efforts are not made simultaneously to fundamen-

tally improve the framework conditions". Or, in other words, "the focus was on the activities in the beginning, whereas today it is clearly on the impact". The basic principles nevertheless remain the same: "Switzerland does not pursue any geostrategic interests with its aid. Instead, this is shaped by pragmatism. The strategy of enabling people to help themselves is also a constant."

The retrospective assessment by Swiss non-governmental organisations is more critical. According to Peter Niggli, Switzerland was initially reluctant to recognise its shared responsibility for the nations that had been granted independence. Niggli is head of the development organisation Alliance Sud, which lobbies on behalf of the six major Swiss aid organisations. He also believes that it was too much a case of

good intentions but poor implementation in the early days. For example, for an electricity station redevelopment in Mozambique, Switzerland simply delivered the entire project: "The order was placed with Swiss companies. The money went from Berne to Baden, thereby remaining in our economy." Development aid that involves full order books for domestic industry is neutrally termed "tied aid". Critics call it "export promotion with a charitable coating". Niggli says: "Tied aid prevents developing countries from learning and denies them economic benefits." Switzerland has now abandoned tied aid. Niggli believes this was one of the most important changes ever in Swiss development aid. Martin Dahinden also feels it was "definitely a step in the right direction".

Not a united nation of philanthropists

The southern regions of the world were ravaged by poverty in 1961. In 2011, the picture is still one of poverty despite significant successes. The purpose of development aid is therefore fundamentally scrutinised on a regular basis in Switzerland and even challenged. Right-wing conservative members of parliament in particular, such as Christoph Mörgeli of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), claim

that aid trickles away ineffectively in many places: "Development aid has failed in Africa especially." More moderate critics say aid should at least not be granted too altruistically: development aid could benefit both sides if, for example, it helped to reduce migration to Switzerland. Here Dahinden warns the idea that Switzerland could simply stop immigration through aid to a developing nation is naive. Development aid may help reduce poverty, he says, but the practice of only providing aid if a country took back its asylum seekers would "often be destined to fail".

Great challenges and a major test

Fierce debate over the purpose and extent of development aid is expected in Parliament in Berne next year. For the first time ever, Parliament will take a decision on all the major multi-annual lines of credit for foreign aid en bloc. These include block credits for assistance to countries of the south, assistance for Eastern Europe, humanitarian aid (emergency aid in disaster situations) and technical development cooperation by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). This amounts to a package of around 11 billion Swiss francs on which the newly elected Parliament

must decide – doing so at a time of economic uncertainty. However, Martin Dahinden expects Parliament to pledge to continue providing aid at the envisaged level. The bundling of the block credit lines for the first time also has benefits. It compels the proposal of an overall strategy.

Grave concerns about the climate

Niggli is less optimistic. He fears the great financial challenges will see Parliament question the increase in development aid resolved at the start of the year (see box on page 10) and possibly cause Switzerland to renege on pledges made. He believes the current international consensus that poor countries must receive financial support in addition to development aid to overcome the impact of climate change is in jeopardy. Switzerland may also succumb to the temptation find the funds required to contribute more to climate projects by cutting back on traditional means of fighting poverty. Dahinden believes the focus on climate is essential because climate change hits the weakest hardest. It is causing deserts to grow, flooding risks to increase, harvests to shrink and the return of diseases believed to have been eradicated, such as malaria. Yet Dahinden does not see this as a trade-off: "Climate adaptation projects are extremely closely linked to the fight against poverty in many cases."

Dahinden has concerns about regions where the political climate is unstable. He says: "Development aid has achieved great success worldwide but there is still major poverty and misery in unstable, fragile countries blighted by conflict." Switzerland therefore plans to do more in such fragile states in future. Today, it is already active in Africa to the south of the Sahara "where instability is increasing". Dahinden estimates that "we will primarily operate in such regions in five to ten years' time".

"Swissness" in development aid?

Looking to the future, Dahinden is calling for "Swissness" in Swiss aid and more "innovation". The general public may well be baffled by this and may wonder whether the fight against extreme poverty perhaps needs cash and food rather than Swissness and innovation. The SDC Director admits the



Development aid in practice: a bamboo bridge in Nepal and two employees of a company manufacturing hammocks in Nicaragua, which is supported by Switzerland



MEDIOCRE SWITZERLAND, EXEMPLARY CANTON OF GENEVA

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) regularly gives Switzerland good marks for the quality of its aid but criticises the volume of Swiss aid as being too small. It is average by international comparison but significantly below UN recommendations. The UN recommends that wealthy industrial nations contribute at least 0.7% of their gross domestic product (GDP) to development aid because this is the only way of achieving the key goals in the fight against poverty. In 2010, Switzerland contributed "official development assistance" of 2.88 billion Swiss francs, which corresponds to 0.41% (2009: 0.45%). At the beginning of 2011, Parliament decided to increase aid gradually to 0.5% by 2015.

"Official development assistance" includes the voluntary contributions of communes and cantons. Geneva is an anomaly here. Geneva's cantonal parliament decided in 2001 that the canton would contribute at least 0.7% of its budget each year "to financing international solidarity".

The popular belief that the Swiss contribute at least as much aid as the state in total through their donations to private aid organisations is disproved by the statistics. The funds available to the around 400 aid organisations included in the statistics constitute around 0.07% of GDP. This means that 70 cents in every 1,000 Swiss francs of income are donated to the southern regions of the world, which is a modest amount by international comparison. (MUL)



concepts require definition but they have also triggered "a constructive debate". By Swissness he means the ethos that Switzerland must deploy its comparative advantages if it is to achieve maximum impact. It should focus on areas in which it possesses great credibility and expertise, such as health promotion, water management – water supply, energy generation and sanitation – and the promotion of democracy. "Innovation in development aid" means "leveraging knowledge if we are to achieve a major impact with modest resources". This kind of "knowledge-based aid" requires that knowledge is conveyed, developed and deployed to produce tailored solutions.

Steadfast? Altruistic? Idealistic?

As a representative of Alliance Sud, Niggli wants Switzerland to show steadfastness above all. He says: "Pressure on development aid is growing worldwide. Donor countries are succumbing to the temptation to spend their money on the promotion of their own economic and geopolitical interests." Switzerland must resist this trend. It has not previously exploited aid for the pursuit of its own interests: "Switzerland cannot turn up with gunboats." Not that he regrets the absence of martial pressure. Quite the opposite: "Switzerland's political and military in-

nocuousness – in other words, the general cordiality of our state – is a much-appreciated characteristic in development aid." Dahinden sees this as perfectly in line with how Swiss aid views itself: "Our development aid is a major part of altruistic Switzerland and its humanitarian tradition."

So, is there any truth to the theory that aid influences how Switzerland is seen in the world? Development aid is actually currently restricted to 14 priority countries, while SECO's economic development cooperation focuses on just seven priority countries (see box on page 11). The visibility of Swiss efforts is therefore limited. It is further restricted by the fact that 40% of Swiss development aid does not go towards projects of its own but rather large-scale, multilateral projects where Switzerland is but one of many donor countries. Dahinden does not regard this as an issue since Switzerland is also seen in multilateral organisations "as a country with a strong voice; as a country that does not act egoistically; as a country with a strong international network that recognises that the wellbeing of others plays a major role in its own wellbeing". Switzerland also represents in the principle that "it is important to be involved, to tackle problems and to help devise solu-



Health promotion in Mali (one of the SDC's priority countries) and an electricity power plant in Khorog, Tajikistan, constructed with support from SECO

tions instead of simply handing out charity".

Niggli agrees: "When aid comes from Switzerland, partners know that it is a firm commitment because the aid workers do not disappear at the first opportunity." However, it is not just government action that contributes to Switzerland's image as a humanitarian country. The Swiss abroad also determine how Switzerland is perceived: "Some Swiss people who have spent two or three years abroad set up small aid organisations upon their return to Switzerland." These individual initiatives contribute "a great deal towards how the world sees our country" and make many of those supported feel that they have not been abandoned in their suffering.

Consumer behaviour is decisive

Are aid providers all altruistic idealists? Is it that the aura of doing good deeds simply makes them feel good? There are various motives for providing development aid, and these are changing in Switzerland too. The Zurich-based philosopher and ethicist Barbara Bleisch presents a contrasting perspective to the view that development aid is a "philanthropic concept" that turns aid providers into moral heroes as their support is voluntary. The author of a doctoral thesis on the subject of "global poverty and individual

responsibility" sees development aid as a duty. She says: "Some people justify this obligation to provide aid by saying that it is morally reprehensible to allow people to starve when we could prevent this suffering. They focus on righteousness. They argue that it is unjust for people to go hungry and demand the redistribution of goods, in other words social justice. Others say we should forget all the fine talk about aid and redistribution. What is unjust is that we as wealthier people are contributing to this misery. And because it is partly our fault we should also bear responsibility." The "justice not charity" approach represents a paradigm shift that has been taking place over the last ten years, says Bleisch.

But what obligations do individuals have to assume if they subscribe to the "justice not charity" principle? Bleisch points to three duties: "The civic duty to support efforts aimed at more global justice; the duty to help, in other words to contribute some of their own wealth – in the form of donations but also taxes; and, finally, the challenging duty of rethinking our purchasing decisions." She also identifies a radical change here: "Until recently I would have said that we just needed another form of consumption. But I am now convinced that this is not enough and that we actually need to limit our con-

sumption", she recently wrote in the SDC magazine "Eine Welt". The consumer behaviour of Swiss citizens is also accelerating climate change, for example, which in turn is having a negative impact on developing countries.

FOCUS ON PRIORITY COUNTRIES

To achieve greater impact, Switzerland is focusing its aid on specific priority countries. The SDC's priority countries are currently Bangladesh, Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Chad, Laos, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Pakistan, Peru and Tanzania. In addition, special programmes also exist in other countries. The priority countries for SECO's economic development cooperation are Columbia, Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, Peru, South Africa and Vietnam. (MUL)