



## Country of missed opportunities: Implementation of Agenda 2030 in Switzerland

Switzerland is known for cheese, chocolate and mountains. The Swiss are not known for speedy adaptation to new political realities. Swiss women only got the right to vote 50 years ago. Also the process of implementing the Agenda 2030 in national politics is putting Swiss civil society organizations to a test of endurance.

In Switzerland, a national sustainable development strategy is summarizing the governments priorities and strategies towards a more sustainable future since 1997. When in September 2015, the heads of state and government of all UN member states adopted the Agenda 2030 with its 17 SDGs, Switzerland had just adopted a new strategy for the period 2016-2019. Sticking to the political calendar did not permit a true integration of the SDGs in this national strategy. A first missed opportunity.

In 2019, the strategy ended, but no new strategy was in sight. The new institutional structure with two delegates in two different ministries and a committee of directors fosters dialogue between federal offices. But slows down the process. The priority is put on having a broad consensus and everyone on board. A first consensus was reached and the federal Council decided to opt for a longer period for its next strategy, aligned to the time horizon set by the Agenda 2030 and for a more participatory process. So far, the strategies were drafted within the federal administration. Now, all external actors were invited to comment on a draft version in a broad, public consultation process. Such consultation processes are mandatory in processes leading to the adoption of a new law, but not usually used for simple strategy processes.

### **Strong mobilization of civil society in public consultation**

A draft version of the strategy was finally published in November 2020 and open for comments until February 2021. In total, more than 230 actors participated, among them cantons, cities and municipalities, the political parties, trade unions, private sector, academia and many NGOs, totaling up to more than 2,000 pages of comment – a strong sign that various actors in Switzerland are taking the Agenda 2030 serious. Finally, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2021, the Federal Council adopted its [2030 Sustainable Development Strategy \(SDS\)](#). Despite the great mobilization in the consultation, the SDS has hardly changed on the whole.

The Swiss CSO Platform Agenda 2030, a network of more than 50 organizations, associations and societies analyzed the draft of the SDS 2030 in detail and participated in the consultation process. We recognize that a national Strategy for sustainable Development is a necessary and fundamentally useful instrument to implement the 2030 Agenda in Switzerland and by Switzerland. However, the adopted strategy does not meet the ambitions of the Agenda 2030 or the SDGs.

The strategy identifies three priority areas: "sustainable consumption and production", "climate, energy, biodiversity" and "equal opportunities and social cohesion". Definitely areas where there is a need for action and coordination for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the federal level. The strategy also identifies civil society, the economy, the financial market and the field of education, research and innovation as drivers for sustainable

development. And it contains a special chapter on the state as role model and inspiration for sustainable action.

### **Lack of ambition**

However, the objectives set in the strategy do not align with the ambitions of the SDGs. For four of the 17 SDGs, the Federal Council does not formulate any targets of its own at all (SDG 9 Industry, infrastructure and innovation, SDG 14 Life below water, SDG 16 Peace, justice and strong institutions, SDG 17 Partnerships). Switzerland may be a landlocked country. [But we eat around 75,000 tons of fish and seafood every year. Of this, 97% is imported.](#) We also contribute to marine pollution via our rivers. For example, more than [40,000 tons of nitrogen from Switzerland enter the oceans via the Rhine every year.](#) Through our agriculture and our consumer behavior, we are therefore contributing to the oceans running out of oxygen.

SDG 16 exemplifies the issue of policy coherence for sustainable development: Switzerland has a demonstrable need for action when it comes to illicit financial flows. It is listed among the [top destinations for tax havens](#) and thereby limiting other countries efforts to mobilize resources for sustainable development at the national level.

In addition, the national objectives formulated in the strategy are not truly translating but sometimes rather diluting the SDGs. For example, while SDG 1.2 aims to halve poverty according to the national definition of poverty, the Federal Council only talks about reducing poverty in Switzerland.

### **Privatizing sustainable consumption will not work**

Overall, the strategy relies too heavily on the assumption that informed and sensitized consumers will also behave sustainably. However, experience shows that, on the contrary, behavioral changes must be accompanied by clear guidelines. For example, we have known for decades that our activities change the climate. But our behavior in front of the shopping shelf is influenced by various parameters: values, price, convenience, advertising. It is impossible to convey all the information regarding sustainability on the product: from water and energy consumption to working conditions in production and profit distribution in the company. Privatizing sustainability through responsible consumption is doomed to failure and overburdens consumers. The state is called upon to set rules and minimum requirements - and thus the framework for sustainable development. Regulations and sanctions are necessary to take action against companies that behave in a way that violates human rights and is harmful to the environment. Voluntary action is not enough. The vote on the [responsible business Initiative](#) has shown that such a demand is capable of gaining majority support. (In Switzerland, for a popular initiative to succeed, a majority of the votes is necessary plus a majority of the cantons. The initiative did get a 50.7% majority of votes, but only a majority in 8.5 of the 23 cantons.)

Nevertheless, the Federal Council is opening the door a little wider to regulation to promote the circular economy and is thus showing minimal concession to the criticism from the consultation process. Although it continues to rely on the economy's own initiative, it wants to examine, if necessary, regulatory and non-regulatory approaches to resource conservation and the promotion of eco-design, repair, sharing and reuse.

Also the chapter on the drivers for sustainable development breathes the spirit of voluntarism. The financial market has a massive influence on sustainable development through its investment volume. Currently, however, it must be seen as a driver of

unsustainable development. The 2020 government report "[Climate Change in Switzerland](#)", clearly shows that "the Swiss financial market is not only significantly invested in oil and coal production, but even co-finances their further expansion. This is not in line with the Paris Agreement's objective of aligning financial flows in a climate-friendly way." (own translation). Framework conditions are therefore required to force the necessary transformation in these sectors towards sustainable development. However, the Federal Council does not take any measures besides increasing transparency and analysis. Again, the choice for a sustainable development is outsourced to the consumer.

The strategy also misses to acknowledge the human rights obligations behind the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda itself is not binding under international law. However, the SDGs are anchored in various binding instruments under international law, e.g. the UN Human Rights Covenants, CEDAW, the Biodiversity Convention, the Disability Rights Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO Conventions or the Paris Climate Agreement. Recognizing these links would strengthen the 2030 Agenda, which thus becomes a binding reference framework for the Federal Council.

### **Leaving the silos?**

We have heard and repeated hundreds of times: sustainable development can only be truly achieved when governments leave their silo-approach and design and initiate strategies across all sectors. The governments strategy however remains in its old silos and rarely offers solutions in a cross-sectoral approach. For example, gender equality and the inclusion of people with disabilities are addressed sectorally in the priority theme "Equal opportunities and social cohesion". In order to achieve these goals, however, adjustments are necessary in the labor market. This must be designed in such a way that people with disabilities can also find income opportunities. Or women finally receive equal pay for equal work. More attention must also be paid to the issue of equal opportunities in the area of digitization. Women are often forgotten or ignored when data is collected. As artificial intelligence learns from existing data, this "gender data gap" is amplified in an automated and digitized world. Structural inequality - not just gender inequality - is thus perpetuated and entrenched. The priority topic "sustainable consumption and production," which includes goals on the labor market as well as the digital transformation, is largely silent in this regard.

Securing our old-age provision must also be addressed across all areas. What good is a retirement pension if the quality of life drops dramatically due to climate change or biodiversity loss? Based on the consultation, the Federal Council supplements the strategy with a minimalistic concession: "The Federal Council supports the pension institutions in their efforts to also take into account the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement when managing pension assets" (own translation).

The Strategy contains an Action Plan designed for the upcoming years 2021-2023. It is meant to define concrete and cross-sectoral measures that will be taken in order to implement the strategy. It was adopted at the same time and contains interesting measures, but also large gaps. For example, evaluations of the sustainability of economic agreements are to be intensified and social cohesion in neighborhoods and agglomerations is to be strengthened. The Federal Council is thus going some way towards meeting demands from civil society. However, the action plan does not contain any new measures for gender equality or for the inclusion of people with disabilities. Here, too, cross-cutting instruments are needed to create equal opportunities.

## **No desire to set a positive example**

Even the chapter on the role of the government in setting an example lacks ambition. State institutions at national, cantonal and municipal level do have a leverage. They are an important consumer of various goods, be it for road and railroad construction, uniforms in the army or health providers, construction of public buildings such as schools or hospitals. They have a say in food offered in canteens in public institutions etc. But the strategy does not provide any objectives that go beyond the general objectives. When Switzerland as a whole is committed to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050, so does the government. Truly setting an example would mean, setting more ambitious objectives for your own activities and thereby leading the way.

Last but not least, a sustainable development strategy should come with the necessary resources. However, proposals for adequate financing of sustainable development are missing. The draft SSD does not provide for additional funding: "The federal agencies shall ensure the financial and human resources necessary for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda within the framework of their approved budgets." The SDS does not include resources for its implementation. A strategy should be a forward-looking document that shows the resources needed to implement it, and not just a backward-looking list of what has already been decided and financed.

In short, although some important additions have been made, the document still does not live up to the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda and misses the opportunity to comprehensively implement the SDGs.

## **Hope for action at the sub-national level**

Several cantons are developing their 2030 Agenda according to their own modalities. Geneva already published a sustainable development concept four years ago, which will be implemented via a 2019-2030 action plan. The canton of Fribourg adopted its sustainable development strategy in 2020. And the canton of Vaud adopted its own strategy in June. Ticino has structured its 2019-23 legislative program on the basis of the 2030 Agenda. The city of Yverdon-les-Bains is a pioneer: it is the first Swiss city to adopt an urban Agenda 2030. Other cities are in the process of developing their strategies.

The challenges we face today require decisive action now. Already years ago, scientists warned that the tipping points in our planetary system could be reached sooner than previously thought. Once a tipping point is reached, changes are no longer reversible. They trigger chain reactions that can no longer be reversed. The developments at the sub-national level are reason to keep up with optimism. In the highly decentralized state structure of Switzerland, cantons and municipalities do have competencies and – most importantly – their own fiscal income and resources to actually implement their strategies, act as positive examples and use their leverage as consumer of goods and services. Whereas at the national level, political will still is lacking, at the sub-regional level important choices can be made for a more sustainable future.

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