

Information for and about Development Politics and Action in Switzerland: A Partnership between Government and Civil Society

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Abstract

This paper will first expose the specificities of the information landscape for and about development politics and action in Switzerland; it will then explain a partnership between government and civil society that has been built to address this specific situation, and finally it will expose the main services that are offered as a result of this partnership.

Keywords: Switzerland, information, development politics, development action.

Landscape of Information for and about Development Politics and Action in Switzerland

In 1971, four of the six major Swiss development organizations (Swissaid, Action de Carême, Pain pour le Prochain, and Helvetas) jointly opened a documentation centre in Bern, and a second one in Lausanne in 1981, under the name Informationsdienst Dritte Welt (i3w), later entitled the Alliance Sud documentation centres. The aim of these centres was to fill a gap in the information landscape on issues related to Swiss development politics and action. Until then, there was no real possibility for the general public to get specific and popular information about these issues.

Academics are well served by the library of the Graduate Institute in Geneva, and Swiss government employees working in the field of development and cooperation are served by the internal documentation centre of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). But information of this nature was not widely available for the general public, in particular for elementary school pupils and teachers, high school students and teachers, NGOs, church or government workers (other than SDC workers), journalists, migrants, and other persons. Information was not accessible materially because only the library of the Graduate Institute in Geneva was open to the public. But even more importantly, the information was inaccessible in terms of content, due to the high specialization of the documents.

Partnerships between the Government and Civil Society

Alliance Sud, the Swiss Alliance of Development Organisations, originally created the documentation centres without any additional support. Alliance Sud is the common platform for development policy lobbying by the six major Swiss development organisations (the four cited above plus Caritas Switzerland (joined in 1992) and HEKS (joined in 2003)). Alliance Sud strives to influence Switzerland's policies for the benefit of countries in the southern and eastern developing world. If Alliance Sud's core mission is political lobbying, why did the organisation feel compelled to serve in the documentation sector? To understand this question, we need to explain briefly the thinking behind the creation of a common lobbying platform for development organisations and provide background information on the political system of Switzerland. Finally, we also need to consider the globalized reality in which we all live, which implies that some local actions become global in terms of impact and responsibility.

In the common sense, development work is understood exclusively as field work that NGOs and governments accomplish, primarily in southern countries. But actually, development action in the Global South cannot be efficient if national politics in the North keep contradicting these efforts. Thus, development work also needs to be done in the North at the political level to try to influence decisions and make them coherent with the development field work in the South. Understanding the importance of this aspect of development, and in order to strengthen their political weight, the six major Swiss development organisations gathered and created a common lobby platform called Alliance Sud that became a strong and unique political voice for their interests.

The political aspect of development work implies that any citizen of a democratic country is concerned with these issues, at least morally. This is because decisions taken by an elected government have a direct impact on inhabitants of the Global South, and because citizens have the right to express their opinions about these decisions. In Switzerland, this concern is not only moral but directly political. As a direct democracy, Switzerland gives citizens the opportunity not only to elect government officials, but also to express their opinions and exert direct political pressure. Citizens do this by voting on laws through a direct democracy system; proposing new laws through initiatives; and striking down laws that have been voted on by the Parliament through referendums. In this specific context, one understands that it is absolutely necessary that Alliance Sud to complete its lobbying work towards Parliament through its documentation efforts: it strongly contributes towards raising awareness about these issues on behalf of the general public, and provides needed information and documentation for citizens to make free, balanced, informed, and responsible decisions.

Finally, to explain the activity of Alliance Sud in the documentation sector, we also have to consider that not only as political citizens do we all have a global impact, we also have an impact in our day-to-day lives: our mobility has a direct impact on the global environment; our consumption choices have a direct impact on the life of workers on the other side of the planet. In this context, not only national political decisions, but also individual and localised actions have a global impact. This fact makes the work of mediating information about global issues towards the general public in northern countries more and more important.

In 2001, the SDC decided to financially support the efforts of the documentation centres. SDC acknowledges that the documentation service of Alliance Sud is unique in Switzerland

and necessary for the efficiency of development and cooperation work, not only for NGOs but also for the Swiss government. SDC brings in one third of the annual budget of the centres. The goal of the contribution is to ensure the presence of the centres in the long term and to support the development and maintenance of quality products.

This contribution is awarded for three years and its continuation is based on an external evaluation. The latest evaluation was completed in 2012. It confirmed that these information needs exist, and that the Alliance Sud documentation centres are the only organisations in Switzerland offering information in this field to the general public. It also confirmed the necessity of the institutional integration of the documentation centres under Alliance Sud, and the continuing need for budgetary contributions from the state.

The fact that the Alliance Sud documentation service receives funding from development organizations (the six cited above, plus Solidar Switzerland since 2010 and Terre des Hommes Switzerland since 2011) as well as the government, endows the service with a rare and priceless independence. NGOs are often confronted with the problem of having to repeatedly deliver short term projects in order to get funds: indeed it is often difficult to convince donors to invest long-term for ordinary but indispensable staffing and management work. Although Alliance Sud documentation service has the status of a NGO, it receives a precious financial stability due to the fact that the service is part of the organization Alliance Sud, and from governmental support. This long term funding model ensures stability in human resources, and allows it to develop and to maintain relevant and quality products and services. At the same time, the fact that the main funding source comes from development organizations preserves its status as an NGO and provides it with the necessary latitude to act as an independent and critical body.

Products and Services

Alliance Sud documentation offers two physical documentation centres. The specificities of the collections are the following:

- Languages: bilingual (in Bern the documentation is in German and in Lausanne in French);
- Focus: grey literature, mainly press clippings and journal articles, in Lausanne and both monographs and grey literature in Bern;
- Scope: covers all the countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe as well as all global issues (environment, politics, economics, etc.) ; 10 years archives;
- Target: the public, including elementary school pupils and teachers, high school students and teachers, NGO, church or government workers (other than SDC workers), journalists, migrants and other interested persons.

The documentation centres also offer regular (weekly or monthly) personalized thematic press reviews for individuals or organisations; and a «search on demand» service. In the last 10 years, a big effort was put in the development of electronic resources. The main products now available are:

- A video portal with more than 300 video clips in French, German and English, classified under 10 main themes and searchable with a free search engine;
- A web links database with more than 500 reference websites classified under 10 main categories, which is also searchable;
- A library catalogue;
- Viele Infos – Eine Welt: (in German only) to reflect the richness of the documentation from and about Southern countries; the portal selects and recommends fiction and movies;
- Pedagogical material (created in collaboration with other NGOs, namely e-media, Education21 and La Jeunesse débat);
- Electronic resource collections on hot topics (e-dossiers).

Conclusion

The physical documentation centres face the same challenge as all libraries face today, i.e. attendance is dropping because people prefer to access information on the internet rather than visiting a physical library. This is of course the reason why the service has invested tremendous effort in developing its electronic services in the past years. Still, we remain convinced that direct interaction with the public is important, especially in a field where we have to deal with delicate and occasionally hot-button issues that have major political and economic implications, and that are often subject to attempts at information manipulation. This is the reason why we endeavour to make contact with our public through proactive outreach: by participating in numerous meetings, conferences and events, and by working on a more efficient marketing strategy to reach out to the public in their native environment.