

# THE CASE OF SWITZERLAND: FORGING THE RIGHT FUTURE

THIS IS JUST  
THE BEGINNING!

FORMULATING A  
GOVERNMENT-WIDE  
POSITION IN  
SWITZERLAND



SWITZERLAND AS  
A ROLE MODEL

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## THE CASE OF SWITZERLAND: FORGING THE RIGHT FUTURE

*For Switzerland's officials, the process of forging the country's national position on the sustainable development goals was a challenging exercise, but the process yielded positive results and became one of learning from each other, listening and trust.*

It was at the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) that world leaders reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable development, underscoring its economic, social and environmental dimensions. The Conference therefore called for the development and adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), welcoming greater integration of the different dimensions of sustainable development in this new framework. It is believed that only such integration would create a transformative agenda and be truly sustainable. The challenge was that every interest group tried to have its theme included in the SDGs, even as a dedicated goal.

Following this call, a new set of 17 (SDGs) was laid out by a UN Working Group on 19 July 2014. Despite the fact that the proposal contains some contradiction among some goals and targets, it reflects a certain level of integration of biodiversity and is, at least, an improvement over the Millennium Development Goals (the SDGs predecessor).

But leading up to this proposal had been a long journey for countries to formulate their national positions for this new development agenda.

At a national level these negotiations prompted interesting inter-ministerial and cross-disciplinary discussions and it was vital to include biodiversity into these goals given the nature-based solutions that biodiversity and ecosystems offer. Different interests seemed to collide: advocates of pushing for social equity came up against those favouring the environment or those putting economic growth first.

Switzerland's approach is quite illustrative and helps to pinpoint some of the factors that enhance or enable mainstreaming.

### FORMULATING A GOVERNMENT-WIDE POSITION IN SWITZERLAND

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation began

by adopting a cross-sectoral approach as the SDGs concern a variety of issues from different sectors. It also established an interdepartmental task force, composed of 16 ministries.<sup>1</sup> Among other remits, this task force was concerned with formulating the overall Swiss position on the SDGs.

Discussions began late 2012 and to facilitate them, various ministry-led working groups produced draft position papers to be discussed by the task force. Biodiversity issues were represented by the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN). But FOEN was to face some challenges.

### NOT EVERYBODY IS AN EXPERT ON EVERYTHING

As FOEN led discussions it perceived hesitation and reservation by some colleagues in other ministries. FOEN's representatives still continued to argue for the integration of biodiversity into the SDGs and into the Swiss position. However, only little progress seemed to be made and the reason for this was unclear.



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But through regular exchanges, it became clear that there was a lack of understanding within the group of what biodiversity actually meant and comprised. It turned out that this had been the key obstacle that FOEN faced in trying to convince the other task force members.

Therefore gears were shifted and more effort was put into

<sup>1</sup> Development and Cooperation (DEZA), State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), Federal Office for Agriculture (FOAG), Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) (General Secretariat, Human Security Division, United Nations and International Organisations Division, Sectoral Foreign Policies Division), State Secretariat for International Financial Matters (SIF), Swiss Federal Statistical Office (BFS), Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), Swiss Federal Office of Energy (SFOE), Federal Office for Migration (BFM), Federal Office for Public Health (FOPH), State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SBFI).



# MAINSTREAMING BIODIVERSITY —

ensuring that everybody understood what biodiversity actually is, as well as how ecosystems function and provide key services. A foundation was created and became fertile ground for the key arguments on the integration of biodiversity. Members of the task force learned more about the other issues and questions they raised also taught each office to improve its arguments and upgrade its proposed position. The task force thus became a forum for mutual learning.

FOEN also gained important insights into other ministries' priorities such as disaster risk reduction for development cooperation. This background information enabled the office to adapt its arguments to the people and ministries they were trying to convince and show how biodiversity contributes to their priorities.

After refinement through several broad national consultations, the Federal Council approved the Swiss position in June 2013 (and updated it in June 2014). Due to the increased understanding of all topics, members had been able to draw links when formulating the position and therefore the position integrates well the different themes including biodiversity.

## SWITZERLAND AS A ROLE MODEL

Two key factors were essential in achieving Switzerland's success. First the institutional set-up chosen and second the flexibility of the task force's members.

The interdepartmental task force was composed of all relevant ministries with a stake in sustainable development. Having the position developed in such a participatory manner ensured commitment and uptake by all involved. Furthermore the extended period of time during which meetings were held, as well as their regularity (usually once a month) also contributed to a successful outcome. This created a platform for exchange where participants got to know and trust one another, understood the different priorities and challenges, learned from others and were able to respond to their hesitations.

Another key facilitative factor was the flexibility of the task force members. By listening carefully to the different points of views voiced, understanding the key challenges

for their argumentation and adjusting its approach as discussions progressed, FOEN was able to foster an understanding of the need for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity for human well-being within the Swiss national institutions.



## THIS IS JUST THE BEGINNING!

The increased knowledge of biodiversity and sustainable development will most probably enable the task force members to take their newly acquired understanding back to their respective ministries and start integrating into their daily work (not directly linked to the SDGs).

Ensuring that biodiversity is fully integrated in the global set of SDGs is a key step towards mainstreaming biodiversity nationally. It is expected that having key biodiversity considerations in the SDGs will lead to a 'trickling down' effect once these goals are being implemented at the national level. All ministries will then face biodiversity considerations in goals and targets addressing their areas. The Swiss approach paved the way, ensuring that relevant ministries are already aware of this process and familiar with addressing sustainable development in a more holistic manner.

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