

# The Swiss Nonprofit Sector

## An insight into an invisible field

Prof. Dr. Bernd Helmig<sup>◦</sup> and E.M.A Christoph Bärlocher<sup>•</sup>

- *Christoph Bärlocher* (corresponding author) is Research Associate at the Institute for Research on Management of Associations and other Nonprofit Organizations (VMI) at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). Contact details: [christoph.baerlocher@unifr.ch](mailto:christoph.baerlocher@unifr.ch); Phone: +41 26 300 84 10; Fax: +41 26 300 97 55.
- *Bernd Helmig* is Full Professor and holds the Chair of Nonprofit Management & Marketing, Department of Business Administration at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). Furthermore he is Director of the Institute for Research on Management of Associations and other Nonprofit Organizations (VMI) at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at the same University. Since 2007 he is also affiliated professor at the University of Mannheim (Germany). Contact details: [bernd.helmig@unifr.ch](mailto:bernd.helmig@unifr.ch); Phone: +41 26 300 84 12; Fax: +41 26 300 96 45.

### Abstract

#### Theoretical Background

Switzerland is the only larger country in Western Europe where the role, the productivity and the status of Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs) are almost entirely unknown, even though these organizations play an important role in the economical, social and cultural life of Switzerland. The large number of typical NPOs – like charitable organizations, sport associations, trade associations, unions or human rights movements – which are a part of our daily life illustrate this impressively. However, because of their heterogeneous structure, NPOs even do not consider themselves as part of one and the same sector. This may be one of the reasons why these organisations are not registered separately in the Swiss official statistics (Federal Statistics Office, FSO). Therefore, FSO-data must be customized in the first place for the needs of the study (Wagner 2007).

However, there are additional inadequacies in the data provided by the state office. Informal and less institutional organizations are not included in official surveys. Instead of 100'000 associations – which, according to rough estimations, may be the correct figure – the FSO only takes 5'471 associations into account for the purpose of their analysis. These facts show that official data alone do not suffice to generate an accurate overview of the Swiss civil society sector. For this reason, a survey of the associations has become necessary and is currently being undertaken by the authors.

Because of similar circumstances in most countries of the world, the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP) was initiated in the 1990s to improve the knowledge of NPOs. The CNP is the major project around the world, which brings the civil society sector into better empirical and conceptual focus. The project has now been extended to more than forty countries. The authors are now conducting the necessary surveys for the Swiss study of the CNP. (Salomon et al. 2003, Salomon et al. 2004)

### **The approach and the aims**

The aim of this contribution is to give a first actual insight into the findings of the country study Switzerland. The available secondary data combined with the first collected primary data ought to disclose the structure, scope and financing of the civil society sector in Switzerland. In addition, the article will allow first comparisons of NPOs in Switzerland to those elsewhere in the world in specific industries, such as healthcare or the social welfare sector. Furthermore, the article discusses the barriers and pitfalls encountered during the analysis of the secondary data as well as while collecting primary data by means of the association survey.

### **Literature:**

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