

The Long and Winding Road

Designing and Creating a Social Science Research Infrastructure in Switzerland

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The programme of this symposium states in a quite straightforward way that “FORS is the result of the merger of SIDOS, the SHP, and SELECTS”. There was a fourth element that had to be integrated into FORS: the Social Report, established under the auspices of the Priority Programme “Demain la Suisse” and since the end of this programme in need of a stable institutional host.

In reality this merger came not that straightforward about, and it took quite some time.

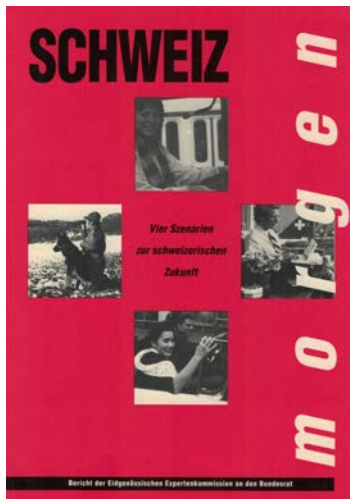
In my presentation I will concentrate on the intricate way FORS came into being, since the present cannot be fully understood without knowing the past, and the past teaches us lessons that might be useful for shaping the future. I feel that an overview of the major steps that lead to the establishment of FORS is a valuable take-off into today’s discussions.

So let’s go back as far as the year 1991: Official Switzerland celebrated the so-called 700th birthday of the nation. One of the actions of the Federal Government was to commission a report on the future of Switzerland to a group of distinguished experts.

The 150 pages report was published in 1991 under the title “Schweiz morgen” – “Switzerland tomorrow”.

One of the members of this expert group was the Swiss political scientist Wolf Linder. It was certainly not without his influence that the sentence shown on the following slide found its way into the recommendations of the report.

„Schweiz morgen“ Report by the expert group to the Federal Council, 1991



„The education in parts of the humanities and social sciences lacks behind the natural sciences and the medical disciplines, which are funded directly by the Confederation or via dedicated universities. This cannot be overcome by the cantonal universities and calls for a direct engagement by the Confederation.“ (p. 151)

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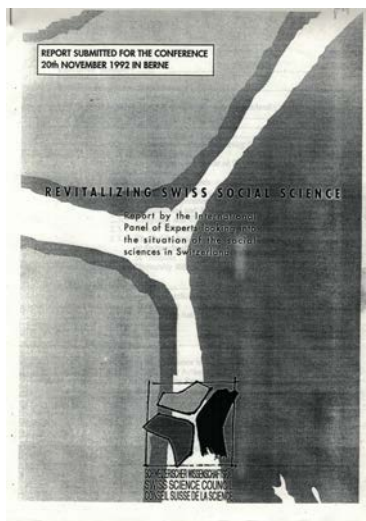
Parallel to the elaboration of this report there was an evaluation of the current state of the social sciences in Switzerland going on. The evaluation had been launched by the learned societies for sociology, education science, political science, and psychology and became known under the heading of “Evaluation SOWI”, where SOWI stands for “Sozialwissenschaften” – social sciences. There were quite a number of papers produced, among them one by your humble narrator on social scientific research outside academia.

The most important and most influential product of this evaluation was a report by an international panel of experts. This report was based on a number of hearings with key stakeholders and had the ambitious title “Revitalizing Swiss Social Science”.

One of the members of this expert panel was the German political scientist Max Kaase who was to become the first Chair of the FORS Scientific Board many years later. He served in this function for 8 years.

Among the numerous recommendations in this report was also the launching of a research programme aimed at stimulating social sciences in a wide sense, as you can see on the following slide. However, at that point in time it was not clear under which conditions and with which instruments such a programme could be enacted.

„Revitalizing Swiss Social Science“ Report by the International Panel of Experts looking into the situation of the social sciences in Switzerland, 1992



„The ensuing research programme should be designed to last for a fixed period (...). It is imperative that the programme will serve to stimulate and link together fundamental and applied research, within a framework which combines paradigmatic pluralism with disciplinary integrity. (...) The task for the social science community will be to demonstrate that the programme will contribute both to fundamental research (...) and to policy analyses, (...) and that it will provide a vehicle for strengthening Swiss social science, across a range of research disciplines (...).“ (p. 27)

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There was a third important development that took place around 1990: The successful establishment of the Swiss Information- and Data Archive for the Social Sciences in Neuchâtel, well-known under its acronym SIDOS.

Several former SIDOS collaborators are here with us today, including its last director. You will meet Dominique Joye as a participant of the concluding panel later this afternoon.

Not much seemed to happen in the following years. However, the group that had launched the Evaluation SOWI stayed active, temporarily hosted by the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences. Some conceptual and strategic work was done following the recommendations of the expert panel.

The Swiss Information- and Data Archive for the Social Sciences SIDOS, 1992-2007



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It was around 1995 that, for a short time only, a window of opportunity opened for realizing a research programme as suggested by the experts. The instrument called Priority Programmes – Schwerpunktprogramme, Programmes prioritaires – run by the Swiss National Science Foundation had been established. But: Following the first call, exclusively proposals coming from the natural sciences were approved.

The “Club SOWI”, as it was called meanwhile, immediately took action. I remember having spent part of the Christmas holiday (the funding decisions became publicly known around mid-December) together with the then president of the Swiss Sociological Association, Walo Hutmacher from Geneva, by drafting an open protest letter to the minister in charge, Ms Ruth Dreifuss. The letter stated that the social sciences would be perfectly fit for such large research programmes and that it was unacceptable that they were excluded from this important instrument.

Being the clever politician that she was, Ms Dreifuss reacted by inviting the social sciences to submit a proposal for such a programme. She might not have expected it, but this is what actually happened. The outcome was the endeavour that subsequently became known under the label “Demain la Suisse”.

SPP „Demain la Suisse“, 1996 - 2003



„The Swiss Priority Programme (SPP) ‚Switzerland: Towards the Future‘ was launched in January 1996. In a first phase (1996-1999), the Programme saw the completion of 57 research projects. January 2000 marked the start of a second phase of 45 projects. Concurrently, the Programme is implementing numerous measures to strengthen the structure of the social sciences.“ (p. 5)

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At that time, “Demain la Suisse” was the largest social scientific programme ever run in Switzerland, with more than 100 projects and an overall investment of 45m Swiss Francs over the whole 8 year period.

The most important impacts of the programme were threefold: First, *the launching of several long-running infrastructures* that are still active, like for example the Swiss Household Panel, the Swiss European Social Survey, or the continued participation in the International Social Survey Programme via the survey called MOSAiCH.

Second, “Demain la Suisse” offered *qualification opportunities* for quite a number of young researchers doing their PhD theses or their post-docs. Several of them became professors later on and are important senior scholars nowadays like for example the directors of the neighbouring NCCRs LIVES and On-The-Move, Dario Spini and Gianni D’Amato.

The third impact, on the institutional side this time, was a report by a working group established by the Ministry on “*Förderung der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften*” – “*Advancement of the Humanities and the Social Sciences*” in 2002. The report explicitly made reference to the achievements of “Demain la Suisse” in the realm of research infrastructures and approved of their continuation. As you can see on the following slide, there was even a budget figure mentioned – rather tight though.

„Förderung der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften“ Report by the working group established by the federal administration, 2002



„The SPP ‚*Demain la Suisse*‘ established a series of instruments for the continued monitoring of social change in Switzerland (e.g., the Swiss Household Panel SHP, the Swiss Electoral Studies SELECTS, the European Social Survey ESS). It is important for the social sciences that these instruments be continued. (...) Just as important is an appropriate development of the Swiss Information- and Data Archive for the Social Sciences SIDOS.“ (p. 31)

„Continuation of the instruments for social monitoring established by the SPP ‚*Demain la Suisse*‘: 3m CHF per year.“ (p. 40)

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One of the ideas that were discussed and re-discussed several times and in different settings in those years was the establishment of a research and infrastructure centre for the social sciences that would bundle many of the pertinent activities in a stable and sustainably funded institution. At the end of the programme “Demain la Suisse” in 2003 we felt that we should sum up all these debates by describing the rationale and the possible organizational form of such an institution. Being the so-called “coordinator” of “Demain la Suisse”, I had the honour of authoring the 50 pages document about a “Feasibility Study on a Centre of Excellence in the Social Sciences”.

This paper was well received by the programme authorities – and it was safely stored on a number of hard drives and in different drawers. But it helped to clarify some basic concepts and proved to be productive in the subsequent discussions.

These discussions happened mainly in the context of the Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences. Its Secretary General, Markus Zürcher, was very supportive of carrying on with the concept during several years when only few people continued to believe that the establishment of such a centre was more than an optimistic vision.

„Ein Kompetenzzentrum für die Sozialwissenschaften in der Schweiz“ Feasibility study, 2003



„An institution which could become a landmark of excellence in the social sciences should be based on a strategically focused and coordinated initiative that takes into account the lessons learned from previous approaches as well as the existing institutional and economic environment.“ (p. 4)

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Another window of opportunity opened after we had investigated the interest of universities to host such an institution. We were told by the Ministry that a mixed funding scheme would be feasible if a university was prepared to contribute substantially. There was an open competition, and there were hearings by an international panel of experts, which in the end recommended to accept the offer of the University of Lausanne to host and to support the new institution. The formal decision was communicated in April 2007. The condition was that the centre had to be operational 9 months later, by January 1, 2008.

And it was: the name and logo were created, the foundation was legally established, statutes and a governance structure were enacted, social security and pension schemes were set in place, collaborators were hired, and the premises and the communication infrastructure were prepared.

All this would not have been possible in such a short time without the strong support of the host university and of its central staff under the leadership of its then Rector, Dominique Arlettaz, here with us today.

FORS up and running from January 1, 2008 onwards

FORS
Fondation suisse pour la recherche en sciences sociales

ForsInfo 1
Informations sur la Fondation suisse pour la recherche en sciences sociales

LES FORS
Les sciences sociales unissent leurs forces

FORS est la Fondation suisse pour la recherche en sciences sociales. Elle a été créée sur mandat de la Confédération et a obtenu son statut de loi fédérale. Présidée par l'Université de Lausanne, FORS propose une large palette de prestations dans le domaine des sciences sociales.

La Fondation suisse pour la recherche en sciences sociales (FORS) a vu le jour au milieu des années 1990 et a été officiellement créée en 2001. Elle est financée par le budget fédéral de la Confédération suisse. FORS a pour mission de mettre à disposition des chercheurs indépendants et de la recherche, SFRU, par des contributions du Fonds national suisse (FNS) ainsi que par l'Université de Lausanne, l'institution hôte de FORS.

Résumé des principaux objectifs scientifiques de la FORS

FORS a pour mission de soutenir les infrastructures et les projets de recherche et d'encourager la création, comme le Panel suisse de ménages, Swiss Household Panel Study ou le Rapport social suisse. Ces derniers constituent des données de référence de FORS. La Fondation suisse pour la recherche en sciences sociales (FORS) a pour mission de mettre à disposition des chercheurs indépendants et de la recherche, SFRU, par des contributions du Fonds national suisse (FNS) ainsi que par l'Université de Lausanne, l'institution hôte de FORS.

Qui Est Qui chez ForS ?

FORS est constituée de trois unités fonctionnelles. Les infrastructures de données sont gérées par le Centre de données de la recherche en sciences sociales (CDRSS), qui travaille en collaboration avec l'Office fédéral de la statistique (OFS) et permet aux chercheurs d'accéder aux données de référence de la recherche en sciences sociales pour les sciences sociales. Le programme de recherche, structuré en projets de recherche, est mené par des groupes de travail, qui sont soutenus par des collaborateurs scientifiques de FORS qui travaillent en étroite collaboration avec les chercheurs et les équipes de recherche. Les équipes les plus importantes de FORS sont le Centre de données de la recherche en sciences sociales, qui est dirigé par Peter Frings, et le Centre de données de la recherche en sciences sociales, qui est dirigé par Peter Frings.

Prof. Max Kaase, Institut de Sociologie, Université de Bonn
Prof. Klaus Ameyan, Université de Bonn
Prof. Tony Atkinson, Université d'Oxford
Prof. Monica Bader, Université de Fribourg
Dr. Philippe Bollenberg, OFS
Prof. Robert Gross, Université de Cologne
Prof. Roger Handberg, Université de Genève
Prof. Roger Jowell, City University London
Prof. Christoph Meier, IHP Strasbourg

Une représentation du GER Katharina Eggen, dirigé par le Prof. Gabriel Amadi, présente un aperçu des données de référence de la FORS.

Dr Peter Frings
Directeur de FORS
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„FORS includes infrastructures and research projects that existed beforehand, e.g., the Swiss Household Panel SHP, the Swiss Electoral Studies SELECTS, and the Social Report. The activities of the Swiss Information- and Data Archive for the Social Sciences SIDOS are a part of the FORS portfolio as well. FORS participates in international projects like the European Social Survey ESS and the International Social Survey Programme ISSP, and it represents Switzerland in the Council of European Social Science Data Archives CESSDA. Moreover, FORS runs its own methodological research programme.“
(ForsInfo 1/August 2008, p. 1)



If “Demain la Suisse” helped to “revitalize Swiss social sciences” then the successful establishment of FORS provided the vital social sciences with a strong institutional backbone – which is one of the functions of a research infrastructure.

Let me draw a brief conclusion: A lot can be learned from the processes that led to the establishment of FORS. I try to concentrate this in what I call the “Triple P”: Patience – Perseverance – Pragmatism.

Most important in my view is: not to lose sight of the ultimate goal, but to keep in mind that it can only be reached stepwise and that sometimes detours are necessary in order to overcome obstacles.

Lessons to be learned

The “Triple P” :

- **P**atience: *Wait for the appropriate window of opportunity*
- **P**erseverance: *Be aware of losing sight of the ultimate goal*
- **P**ragmatism: *Be flexible about the details*

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Research in social sciences generally depends to a large part on people: be it passively as researched individuals or groups, or be it actively as researchers. Without a dedicated and competent scientific and administrative staff an institution like FORS can not function.

So let's have a look at the staff:

The Team, 2008



FORS ⁺



The Team, 2018



FORS ⁺



Since we all like statistics: Taking into account the 2 persons who are retired meanwhile, two thirds of the collaborators on the 2008 picture are to be found on that one for 2018 as well. Quite a good sign for FORS as an employer, I think.

FORS is a success. But it can get even better. Therefore, to conclude my presentation and as an input for further discussion, I'd like to draw your attention to some challenges that lie ahead. Again, very briefly and condensed in what I call the "SIR"-Cluster: Service – Impact – Research, because these are the main dimensions of the activities of FORS.

Challenges for the Years to Come

The "SIR" cluster:

- **Service:** *Aspire to serve the social science community at the best:
In the region, nationwide, internationally*
- **Impact:** *Aspire to have a high impact on your key stakeholders:
Create visibility with *flagship products and activities**
- **Research:** *Aspire to succeed in cutting edge research:
Publish in high quality scholarly media*

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With respect to *service* the most important challenge in Switzerland as a multilingual country is the national level. The close collaborative ties with the University of Lausanne are the backbone of the regional presence. The senior scientific collaborators bring with them their international networks, which are reinforced by the participation in comparative surveys and in international organizations like CESSDA ERIC. Crossing the language border on the national level, however, needs continued commitment. The designwise and contentwise streamlined Annual Report 2017 does tell us that there are many collaborative ties all over Switzerland – but it does not give a clue about the distribution of these ties along the language regions. In former times this distribution was not optimally balanced, but this might have improved meanwhile.

An institution like FORS creates *impact* via its flagship products and activities. Looking again at the Annual Report 2017, the Household Panel and the SELECTS data seem to be the most sought after products that are clearly and recognisably linked to FORS. When it comes to reaching out to a non-academic public, however, a widely acclaimed publication that could be connected with FORS alone is unfortunately not listed in the Annual Report.

Doubtlessly cutting edge *research* and the respective scholarly publication activities are crucial for the renown and acceptance of FORS in the scientific community. The main parts of this afternoon will be dedicated to the question what will constitute cutting edge research in the “core business areas” of FORS in the foreseeable future.

Referring to the Annual Report 2017 once again, one notes a constant level of active participation of FORS staff in scientific events over the years, but a steady decline of the total number of scholarly publications since 2010. As it seems there are not enough resources to turn conference presentations into written publications.

This lacuna is an indicator of a structural problem: Successful scholarly publication activities need secure and stable resources dedicated to such activities. I think this point needs special attention in the budgeting process for the coming years.

Choose the Optimal Way – and Make the Best Out of It



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Let me close my short remarks with a general experience: Looking back, you always see a road that leads to what you have at present, even if it is long and winding. But being part of the ongoing process, you will often find yourself at crossroads, in the need to make decisions without knowing all their implications.

I wish FORS and its leadership that they succeed in choosing the optimal way forward and to make the best out of the decision – for the sake of the scientific community and for the sake of FORS.

Thank you so much for all your work – and for your attention.