



Marking the 15th anniversary of FORS - The Role of FORS in Advancing Social Science Research

-Lausanne, Switzerland, December 2023

The 15th anniversary celebration of FORS, the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences, took place at the University of Lausanne on November 16, 2023. It was a momentous event marked by the presence of many previous and current contributors to FORS and discussions centering on FORS's remarkable journey and its future trajectory.

A history of impact

Estelle Doudet, Chair of the FORS Foundation Board and Vice-Rector of the University of Lausanne first outlined the history and impact of FORS. Established 15 years ago as an independent foundation at the University of Lausanne after a national competition, FORS has significantly contributed to advancing high-quality data collection and empirical social research in Switzerland and beyond. A key strength of FORS lies in its facilitation of interdisciplinary collaboration, fostering a deeper understanding of intricate social issues and garnering national recognition within the social science community. The University of Lausanne has been a consistent supporter of FORS and continues to collaborate on initiatives like SWISSUbase, a research data platform designed to encompass diverse disciplines beyond the social sciences. In summary, Estelle Doudet acknowledged FORS's significant contributions to the social sciences over the past 15 years and emphasized its continued importance and potential for further development in the future.

Round table

-Panelists: Katharina Eggenberger (Research Manager & Research Coordinator), Prof. Peter Farago (retired FORS Director), Prof. Emer. Dominique Joye (Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lausanne), Prof. Katja Michaelowa (Institute of Political Sciences, University of Zurich & Center for Comparative and International Studies CIS)

-Moderator: Georg Lutz, FORS Director

Charting FORS's impact

A panel discussion led by experts in the field highlighted FORS's contributions to the social sciences. Over the past 15 years, FORS has been instrumental in supporting the social science research community, as indicated by various perspectives. One viewpoint stressed the

necessity of fulfilling the scientific community's needs, especially in terms of data production, data accessibility, and integration within the Swiss and global scientific research community. FORS successfully met these needs by producing high-quality survey data, giving data access, proficiently managing archives, and fostering connectivity among researchers. Another perspective highlighted the significance of having a coordinating entity for managing large and long-term data collections and organizing research agendas relevant for the entire discipline. FORS admirably assumed this role by organizing collaborative projects, facilitating discussions, and dedicating efforts towards methodological advancements, recognizing the evolving nature of high-quality data and proactively investing in cutting-edge methodologies for data collections. Furthermore, a non-social scientist on the panel emphasized the vital role in 'contributing to discussions concerning open research data and research infrastructure management, acknowledging its expertise as a valuable resource for other institutions outside the social sciences. Additionally, the relative isolation of Swiss social sciences until the 1990ties was noted, emphasizing FORS's pivotal contributions to stabilize the participation in large projects, such as the European Social Survey (ESS), the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) or the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) thereby playing a significant role in integrating Swiss social sciences both nationally and internationally over the past 15 years.

Securing long-time funding

The discussion then centered on the challenges associated with securing long-term funding for FORS, amid the success of the organization. While FORS garners considerable recognition, concerns arise about obtaining sustained funding for an infrastructure of its scale. The debate largely revolved around the tension between the necessity for innovation and the stability imperative for maintaining high-quality surveys and data services. One panelist underscored the constant need for innovation to sustain the standards of data quality and surveys, emphasizing the ongoing debate within FORS about balancing innovation with stability. Another panelist echoed the struggle for stability in funding, highlighting the adverse impact of unstable financial support on the core functions of institutions like FORS. Advocating for a simplified and consistent funding procedure, this viewpoint emphasized the need for long-term stability to avoid repetitive reapplications. A different panelist highlighted FORS's previous success in securing necessary funds despite the challenges. This viewpoint conveyed confidence in FORS's ability to raise funds while acknowledging its indispensable role in Switzerland's research landscape and its substantial contributions to national and international collaborations.

FORS in an evolving landscape

Regarding the question on current trends in the social sciences and where FORS should or should not play a role, the panelists responded as follows: One panelist emphasized the growing significance of infrastructures like FORS in times of limited funding. He highlighted the efficiency of conducting large surveys, foreseeing their continued relevance, albeit in combination with other data sources, posing a challenge for future data integration. Another panelist envisioned FORS's pivotal future role in coordinating diverse initiatives beyond the social sciences, especially concerning fair and open data. She highlighted FORS's potential to become a hub for methodologies and fair open research data, expanding its influence from the social sciences to humanities and beyond to other disciplines. One panelist noted the responsibility of facilitating interdisciplinary work through digital tools, foreseeing the

convergence of various research fields driven by data. She suggested FORS could provide a unified platform, such as SWISSUbase, catering to multiple disciplines' data storage needs. Despite differing perspectives on the funding challenges, there was a collective acknowledgment of FORS's expertise in shaping data spaces and its significant contributions to advancing initiatives like the Framework law for secondary data uses.

Serving beyond the social sciences

In a discussion on FORS's potential expansion beyond the social sciences, the panelists presented varying perspectives: One panelist emphasized the importance of adopting a multidisciplinary approach, advocating for openness to ideas from other disciplines. Another expressed skepticism about integrating disciplinary cultures, highlighting significant differences in formal discourse already between the social sciences and humanities. He suggested that bridging this gap might not be FORS's responsibility, especially considering the vastness of the humanities field. A different panelist echoed the sentiment of avoiding complete intermixing of disciplines. However, she identified common ground with other fields, especially regarding discussions on archiving high-quality data and secondary analysis of existing data. Another supported FORS's role as a coordinator between disciplines, particularly in areas where methodologies and commonalities exist across various fields. Despite differing opinions on the extent of interdisciplinarity, the question persisted about FORS's role in serving other disciplines beyond social sciences.

The panelists' wishes for FORS

The panelists conveyed their wishes for FORS's 15th anniversary. One panelist aimed for maintaining the exceptional success achieved in FORS's initial 15 years, aspiring for continued excellence as a benchmark infrastructure for social sciences. Another highlighted the significance of people in driving infrastructures like FORS. Her wish was for FORS to build bridges between disciplines, countries, academia, administrations, and service orientations, while fostering an open approach to new developments. A different panelist wished FORS to persist in its excellent work and remain steadfast in its mission. Last but not least, another panelist aligning with the proverb 'the better beats the good', expressed a desire for continuous improvement. He emphasized expanding FORS's visibility beyond the social sciences inner circle and suggested potential rebranding strategies for existing studies to strengthen their connection to FORS.

Future prospects and closing words from FORS Director Georg Lutz

At the end, the FORS Director outlined the future directions of FORS from his point of view. FORS constantly reflects on the evolving environment, and the discussions held during the round table sessions are of significant importance. There is an increase of data-driven research in many disciplines, but a major challenge lies in the fact that most of these data do not adhere to the FAIR principles and increasingly research is conducted with data not produced by researchers. Understanding data quality poses a substantial and increasing challenge for the entire discipline.

Moreover, besides the emergence of new data types for research and finding a role of FORS for this, one of the challenges is reconciling open data practices with Switzerland's new data

protection laws and the GDPR, necessitating a delicate balance between these two principles. FORS will continue producing survey data, although the methods for collecting data are evolving. FORS managed to keep data quality high over the last 15 years and in some cases could even increase response rates and reduce response bias through extensive efforts, accompanied by methodological research.

At FORS, the commitment to collect high-quality data through surveys remains. However, the establishment of SWISSUbase marks a significant milestone in our efforts to extend our reach beyond the social sciences with more general services. SWISSUbase was successfully established as a partnership between the Universities of Lausanne, Neuchâtel and Zurich. Additionally, DaSCH is on the verge of joining SWISSUbase, which will then form the basis for the Swiss nodes of all major European infrastructures in the social sciences and humanities.

FORS owes much of its success to the dedication of committed individuals who have contributed significantly to the establishment of FORS's development and current standing. This spans from scholars who dedicated their time and energy over decades to create and build such an institution, researchers willing to serve in the FORS Foundation and Scientific Advisory Boards, the representatives from the host university and faculty and scientific organisations like the SAGW/ASSH, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI), and the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics (OFS) who showed strong support for FORS over many years.

The most crucial element at FORS is its skilled and dedicated staff, who are engaged daily in FORS' many projects and activities. The FORS collaborators embody the DNA of FORS, and the FORS Director expressed thanks to all collaborators for their high-quality work and their invaluable contributions over the last 15 years.

FORS is the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences. FORS implements large-scale national and international surveys, offers data and research information services to researchers and academic institutions, and conducts methodological and thematic research.

www.forscenter.ch

Contact:

Bâtiment Géopolis,
5th floor Reception desk
CH-1015 Lausanne
+41 (0)21 692 37 30
info@forscenter.ch