Report HELVETAS General Assembly (GA) 2019 at the “Kultur- und Kongresshaus” in Aarau (by Franz Gähwiler)

The HELVETAS president Therese Frösch opened the GA with political comments regarding the “women’s strike” of the day before, and the climate demonstrations by young Swiss. HELVETAS stands in for similar values and positions: individual and human rights are to be defended and promoted! The president also reminded the audience of the two initiatives supported by HELVETAS: Corporate Responsibility and Stopping Arms Exports.

The HELVETAS GA was the right occasion to also comment on the recent dispatch by the Federal Council for International Cooperation 2021-2024. HELVETAS questions this dispatch for being pusillanimous, disheartened and including a questionable shift of priorities! The Federal Council and the national parliament apparently express reservations towards development cooperation and NGOs, which is clearly against the position of the Swiss public that showed support for both in various recent votes. Concluding her introductory comments, Therese Frösch provided some positive comments about her recent field visit to Benin, where she met with a group of awe-inspiring women.

During the lunch break the HELVETAS members and guests could visit the different booths that provided information on various HELVETAS topics. Like-minded organisations among them the Society Switzerland-Bhutan were showcasing their collaboration with Bhutan.

Monika Schärer congenially and competently facilitated the afternoon programme, which was started by Rolf Dobelli presenting the “Science of a Good Life, 52 surprising ways to happiness”. Here just three important findings:

- Income above a certain threshold (in Switzerland about CHF 120’000) does not contribute to increased happiness
- The one who can deactivate envy is well on the way to happiness
- Mental subtraction is an important tool to increase happiness

Rolf Dobelli referred quite often to the old Greek stoic philosophers who showed a way to happiness more than two thousand years ago. [http://www.dobelli.com/en/]

Dasho Tshering Tobgay, former Prime Minister of Bhutan, talked to the audience about Community Happiness and Gross National Happiness (GNH). He started narrating the history of the cooperation between Switzerland and Bhutan and particularly the cooperation with HELVETAS. He thanked Switzerland, HELVETAS and the whole audience for the friendship with and support to Bhutan.

Tshering Tobgay considers Gross National Happiness to be the ultimate task of a government [http://www.gnhcentrebhutan.org/]. Bhutan would like businesses to also contribute to the happiness of all stakeholders and not just to their shareholders. Bhutan is going to measure (happiness index) the contribution of private companies to happiness as a new element of their GNH concept.
After the break, Monika Schärer and Werner Külling, long term HELVETAS Secretary General and Resident Coordinator in Bhutan, talked about the early history of the HELVETAS engagement in Bhutan. The history of this successful cooperation is well documented in the book “Far apart and close together, Bhutan and Switzerland – Partners in development since 1950” (2008 Society Switzerland – Bhutan).

Tashi Pem, Country Director HELVETAS Bhutan, presented “Youth and Employment” as the final agenda item.

When youths are interviewed about their professional ambitions, their priorities (still) are:

1. Government employment
2. Private sector employment
3. (Self) Employment in agriculture

The Government of Bhutan places high priority on skill development (vocational training), but there is still a long way to go. The training has been too theoretical and the linkages to the needs of the private sector are still very weak. HELVETAS supports the Government to re-design skill development to be much more practical and to be better aligned with the private sector. Additionally, the private sector is motivated and persuaded to invest in skill development and training on their own and not just to wait and rely on the Government.

The HELVETAS General Assembly is closed with the info about two important HELVETAS events in 2020:

- HELVETAS Annual Event 2020 in Bern on 7 March
- HELVETAS General Assembly 2020 in Zurich on 19 June

Franz Gähwiler

*Former Programme Coordinator Himalaya HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation*

*Board Member Society Switzerland Bhutan*