



Contested Aid Assemblages: How Domestic Political Shifts Shape the Strategies and Practices of Swiss Development NGOs

GEO 511 Master's Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines how domestic political shifts in Switzerland shape the strategies, narratives, and operational practices of Swiss development non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Development cooperation in many aid donor countries is increasingly contested and influenced by nationalist politics, fiscal pressure, migration control agendas, and security concerns. Switzerland reflects these wider trends while also presenting a distinctive case due to its consensus-oriented, direct democracy and the strong role of Parliament in development budgeting and strategy.

The study uses a qualitative and interpretive research design based on expert interviews with senior representatives of Swiss development NGOs. The analysis is guided by assemblage theory and brokerage theory. Assemblage theory conceptualises NGOs as embedded in dynamic relations involving state institutions, funding systems, political actors, public discourse, and media. Brokerage theory highlights how NGOs mediate between competing interests and political pressures. Cindi Katz's (2004) concepts of reworking, resistance, and resilience further support the analysis of adaptive responses.

The findings show that NGOs operate within a political environment marked by increasing parliamentary polarisation, tighter budgets, stronger accountability demands, and growing expectations that development cooperation should serve migration management, national security,

or economic interests. In response, NGOs adapt strategically, discursively, and organisationally. Key responses include building alliances across the sector, improving communication with the public, strengthening lobbying efforts, diversifying funding sources, professionalising management systems, (re)considering private sector partnerships, adjusting project framings to funding priorities and expanding humanitarian portfolios.

At the same time, many NGOs seek to preserve commitments to solidarity, poverty reduction, and localisation despite these pressures. The thesis argues that NGO adaptation should not be understood as a simple reaction to external change, but as an ongoing process of negotiation within a complex political assemblage shaped by unequal power relations. Swiss development NGOs are therefore not passive recipients of political decisions, but active actors who continuously rework, resist, and reshape the conditions under which they operate.

Keywords: Swiss development NGOs, political geography, domestic political shifts, foreign aid politics, NGO adaptation, assemblage theory, securitisation, populism.

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Abbreviations

AC-IC	Advisory Committees on International Cooperation
CHF	Swiss Franc
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
FDFA	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
FDP	Free Democratic Party (<i>FDP.The Liberals</i>)
GNI	Gross National Income
ICS	International Cooperation Strategy
LLC	Locally-Led Cooperation
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PRR	Populist Radical Right
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SECO	State Secretariat for Economic Affairs
SVP	Swiss People's Party (<i>Schweizerische Volkspartei</i>)
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
WFP	World Food Programme

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1 Introduction

At the beginning of 2025, on January 24th, US President Donald Trump ordered a near-total freezing of development-related spending from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Knickmeyer & Amiri, 2025). This decision sent shockwaves across the world, sparking disbelief and outrage among civil society and international development advocates, but also being received warmly by others. Regardless of inclination, countless impacts on health, education, women's safety, peace promotion and other issues for people and their livelihoods in Global South contexts and communities are and continue to be expected (Oxfam America, 2026). The world's largest foreign aid donor, in one swift move, was reduced to a shadow of its former self.

Yet this was just the pinnacle of aid donor nations reducing their funding commitments to international development. In 2025, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), total international development aid fell by 23% to the lowest levels since 2015 (Hallam, 2026). How can this be explained? Certainly not because potential needs and suffering decreased. More likely, this trend can be traced back to domestic political shifts in donor countries.

Switzerland is also among the aid donor nations reducing their spending. As an international entity, geopolitical trends and shifts affect Switzerland. Together with unique domestic dynamics, and its systematic peculiarities, the Swiss political landscape changes. Which of these political shifts are most relevant to the development cooperation sector and may have led to the reduced government spending?

Various research exists on shifting domestic political dynamics and their various impacts on foreign policies and the development aid sector (Bayram et al., 2024; Bayram & Thomson, 2022; Bergmann et al., 2021; Hackenesch et al., 2021; Hammerschmidt et al., 2022; Heinrich et al., 2018, 2021; Mawdsley, 2017; Milner & Tingley, 2013, 2015; Ostermann & Stahl, 2022). However, not much research has focused on how development NGOs as part of donor nations' development policies are affected by these political shifts, despite their well-acknowledged role as implementors

of international cooperation goals (Brass, 2016; Brass et al., 2018; Pickering-Saqqah, 2023). The Swiss International Cooperation Strategy (ICS) 2021-2024, for example, mentions NGOs as important partners for the implementation of the state's international cooperation efforts "because of their expertise, long-standing presence in various countries and detailed knowledge of the situational contexts" (FDFA, 2020: 33). Hence, in combination with my personal interest in Swiss development NGOs' work and my positionality as a Swiss researcher having experienced first-hand the domestic political shifts over the past ca. 15 years, I arrived at my research interest.

For Swiss development NGOs, wilting financial and moral support for their engagements are very meaningful. They rely on various societal and political pillars of support for funding, legitimacy and credibility to function according to their values and purposes. Generally, NGOs vary in their exact self-definitions but are usually characterised by a not-for-profit organisational model. As their name suggests, they act independently of governments and are dedicated to social, humanitarian and/or ecological causes (de Trey-Freymond, 2025).

Specifically, development NGOs particularly make it their mission to support people in need in overseas contexts by conceiving, planning and implementing long-term projects to improve the locals' livelihoods. They assert and legitimise their interests and activities to domestic society by appealing to the moral responsibilities of human solidarity and compassion. However, a major influence on these values are political movements and trends. Shifting political approaches, perspectives, narratives and discourses interact with countless other societal dynamics, which keeps domestic political contexts in flux. Thus, development NGOs are embedded in constantly evolving settings.

1.1 Research question

Political geography and critical development studies scholars have provided scholarly perspectives to analyse the complex, dynamic relationship of development NGOs and shifting domestic politics (Heinrich et al., 2021; Lancaster, 2007; Lundsgaarde, 2013).

Previous empirical research focused more on how NGOs influence and affect foreign aid policies and domestic politics (Banks et al., 2015; Cho, 2024; Macarchuk, 2018; Mcloughlin, 2011;

Springman, 2019). I aim to analyse the reverse: how NGOs are impacted by domestic political shifts and how they react to them. In this thesis, I aim to answer this question and fill a research gap using the specific context of Switzerland.

As such, my guiding research question reads:

- **How do domestic political shifts in Switzerland affect the operative strategies, narratives and practices of Swiss development NGOs?**

To answer this question, I use information gathered in expert interviews with high-level-executive representatives of Swiss development NGOs. I foreground their individual interpretations of what domestic political shifts are relevant to their NGO and their sector. This interpretive approach therefore does not make any quantitative empirical claims, but qualitatively aims to highlight which and how Swiss domestic political shifts are organisationally interpreted and navigated by development NGOs based in Switzerland.

I make use of assemblage and brokerage theories. While assemblage theory conceptualises political contexts as ever-changing spaces of relations between actors and elements imbued with power imbalances, brokerage focuses on the actors' and elements' agencies and positionalities. It breaks up assumptions of other political geography theories such as governance/network theories, which posit political contexts as being more clearly structured.

In my research case, assemblage thinking helps identify the related roles of NGOs, state agencies, Parliament, the public, the Federal Council, and media outlets alongside narratives, discourses and regulations the Swiss development sector. This helps conceptualise political impacts on NGO and their reactions and adaptations to them as not occurring linearly, but temporally fragmented and intertwined with other dynamics (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020).

Brokerage complements this by shedding light on the agency of NGOs within these assemblages and how they navigate relations to the assemblage's other actors and elements, thereby becoming 'assemblers' of assemblages (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018).

1.2 'Development' as a contested concept

From a critical political geography perspective very importantly, I want to actively acknowledge that the term and concepts associated with 'development' are not without their scholarly contentions and critiques. Development is understood, analysed and practiced within historical, spatial/geographical, ideological, ontological and practical contexts (Escobar, 1995). For this thesis, the way development is defined by the state and development NGOs is relevant. The Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) names the reduction of poverty as the goal of development, including economic self-reliance, state autonomy, improvement of production conditions, solutions to environmental problems and access to health and education (SDC, n.d.).

Scholars such as Escobar (1995), Ferguson (1994), Lawson (2007), Mosse (2005), Redfield & Bornstein (2011), Sen (1999), Ziai (2015) have in various ways dissected the discursive and practical elements of dominance imposed through the concept of development from the 'modernised' over the 'undeveloped' world. It is implicitly linked to the humanitarian spirit, which makes aid and development cooperation out to be a moral obligation to be afforded to the less fortunate to alleviate suffering and achieve a more 'developed' state (Redfield & Bornstein, 2011). In this sense, knowledge and authority about what development is and should be remains with liberal, Western, economically powerful actors, showing the inherent power imbalance of development.

These scholars call out certain terminology used in development discourse and practice that reinforces these dominant, neocolonial and dependency-implying global structures. In my thesis, I use some of these terms. They include 'aid', 'policy-nexus', 'fragility', 'Global South'. They imply notions of dominance of actors from the 'aid-giving' over the 'aid-receiving' contexts

It is important for me as doing research from a critical political geography standpoint to clearly state that I am aware of the critical debates behind the use of these terms and that I reflect on them critically. I wish not to reinforce colonial imaginative structures or Eurocentric framings of development with my work. However, due to the scope of this thesis and remaining true to my interpretive approach that centres my interviewees perspectives, I will not reflect much further on these issues in this thesis.

1.3 Outline

This thesis is structured as follows: in **Chapter 2**, I scholarly embed and theoretically ground my work in a review of existing literature on political movements related to development cooperation. In **Chapter 3**, I provide contextualising information on the specificities of the Swiss political and institutional context that my subjects of study are embedded in. **Chapter 4** outlines my multi-scalar conceptual framework of assemblage and brokerage theory that I use to frame my findings. **Chapter 5 and 6** examine and outline the prominent themes and statements that came up in and resulted from my interviews with NGO representatives. **Chapter 7** then discusses the findings using my conceptual framework as a scholarly lens and synthesises an answer to my research question, while reflecting critically on the thesis' shortcomings and providing suggestions for further research.

2 Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of scholarship on domestic political shifts in aid-donor countries that influence development NGOs' strategies and operations.

The first section looks at how foreign aid is shaped by Global North donor countries' domestic politics. In the second section, I prefigure the political dynamics that my interviewees mention. Subsections here include the rise of right-wing populism and its effects as well as how aid is politically and discursively instrumentalised for anti-migration and national security policies. Thirdly, I subsume two sections on shifts that affect how NGOs operate. The first is about increasing accountability demands from the development sector and its related increasing 'corporatisation', the second concerns impacts of localisation and decolonisation debates.

2.1 Foreign aid as established, but contested policy

Foreign aid is officially presented as the Global North's expression of international solidarity and humanitarian responsibility. Its beginning in the modern sense after World War II lies in Point Four of US President Harry Truman's inauguration speech, where he implores the 'developed'

world to “embark on a bold new program” for the “improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas” (Macekura, 2013: 127). Since then, foreign aid has gone on to become established as part of foreign policy for all economically powerful Western democracies¹. Purportedly, its goal is to improve the human condition and alleviate poverty in recipient countries through its “gift of public resources, sizable and sustained over time” (Lancaster, 2007: 1). The OECD’s Development Assistance Committee’s (DAC) mandate is to promote “sustainable development of developing countries, including inclusive and sustainable economic development, the advancement of equalities within and among countries, poverty eradication, and the improvement of living standards” (OECD, n.d.-a). However, scholarship widely demonstrates that foreign aid allocation is never as disconnected from domestic political interests as this mandate suggests (see Lancaster, 2007; Lundsgaarde, 2013; Milner & Tingley, 2015; Tingley, 2010). I touch on how critical development studies debates this taken-for-granted narrative about foreign aid being a universal good and how its scholars situate it within power relations at various scales (see section 1.2).

Representing a redistribution of public resources, ‘tax-payers money’, to foreign states, foreign aid is a contested political issue. Aid proponents see it as capital flowing to countries in need to address the basic needs of their vulnerable populations, while sceptics argue it may actually hinder its designated purpose by delaying political and economic reforms (Lundsgaarde, 2013). Right-leaning parties in donor nations place emphasis on furthering domestic geopolitical and economic interests through aid, though generally advocate for reduced contributions, while left-leaning parties generally support maintaining or increasing aid.

As such, aid budgets are vulnerable to exclusionary, nationalistic narratives. Empirical research on foreign aid has found that this redistribution of funds beyond national borders is politically contested because it raises questions of national responsibility and risks undermining domestic policy goals (Tingley, 2010). Such partisan effects manifest to varying degrees in foreign aid

¹ Rapid economic growth of economies of ‘non-Western’ countries, above all China, has led to them also providing aid, creating competition for influence between the OECD member donors and alternatively oriented donors (for more info see Hille, 2025; Kilama, 2016; Roessler, n.d.). Since Switzerland is an OECD-DAC member, I focus on scholarly debates developed from liberal Western democracy settings.

outcomes, depending on the relative strengths of political actors' voices and the donor state's institutional arrangements (Lancaster, 2007). These "formal and informal rules regulate the interactions in a political system [and] shape policies by influencing the level of access societal interests have to policymakers" (Lundsgaarde, 2013: 8). Popular political movements and institutional dynamics thus help explain why national development engagements change even when long-term commitments formally remain in place.

Development NGOs in liberal Western democracies are embedded in these national policy-making frameworks. Research shows that they can influence foreign aid allocations by shaping public discourse, providing policy expertise, and participating in strategy formulation (Cho, 2024; Macarchuk, 2018). At the same time, NGOs themselves adapt to changing political dynamics, adjusting their advocacy strategies and programmatic priorities in response to evolving funding conditions and policy agendas (Banks et al., 2015). However, empirical studies on development NGOs' adaptations to political change are scant, leading me to the identification of a research gap and thus to my research question (see section 1.1).

2.2 Shifting political dynamics: popular movements and instrumentalization narratives

In the following section, I outline scholarly debates on three prominent themes of political change that emerged in my interviews as affecting development NGOs.

2.2.1 Right-wing populism: nationalist self-orientation

Populist radical right-wing (PRR) movements across Europe emerged again in the 1980-2010 period (Mudde, 2007)². A particular catalyst further entrenching their rise was the 2008 Financial Crisis, which deepened working class's distrust of institutions and elites as protecting themselves and not 'playing fair' in economic and social spheres (Kriesi & Pappas, 2016). Currently, Mudde

² Mudde (2007) identifies three waves of European populist right-wing movements: firstly, in the aftermath of WW I, then as "nostalgic" post-war remnant, and thirdly from 1980 onwards.

(2020) sees many European and other countries ‘riding the fourth wave’ of PRR politics, though individual national forms are very heterogeneous.

A central idea of PRR ideology is the concept of politics being a struggle between the morally ‘pure’, homogeneous ‘people’ and the corrupt elites (Mudde, 2007). It also includes nativism, a xenophobic, exclusionist version of nationalism (Mudde, 2007). Foreign aid and development cooperation as transferring national resources beyond the boundaries of the ‘deserving’ political community is framed as opposed to PRR interests and therefore illegitimate (Heinrich et al., 2021). Although foreign aid has always been political (Lancaster, 2007), PRR actors politicise it in a distinct way by framing this international redistribution as a betrayal of the national community and as overstepping the moral boundaries of the nation (Mudde, 2007). Gómez-Reino (2019) also demonstrates that PRR parties across Europe systematically mobilise ‘we first’ narratives that make foreign aid incompatible with democratic responsibility towards domestic constituencies. These discursive strategies undermine development cooperation as not self-evidently legitimate through ideas of solidarity (Gómez-Reino, 2019).

Empirical research suggests that these narratives are not just limited to rhetoric but reflected in foreign aid policy outcomes. Hammerschmidt et al. (2022) show that stronger parliamentary representation of PRR parties is associated with downward development of official development assistance (ODA) levels and a reorientation of aid priorities towards domestically salient concerns such as migration control. Interestingly, they see this as an indirect “result of mainstream parties adjusting their policies in an attempt to regain voter support after having lost against the rising PRR parties in the previous election” (Hammerschmidt et al., 2022: 494).

Systematically examining the relationship between individual discursive elements of PRR movements and foreign aid, Heinrich et al. (2021) show that the prevalence of nativism and anti-elitism sentiments are significant indicators for decreasing support for aid in OECD countries. As a result, development cooperation has increasingly become subject to domestic electoral competition and legitimacy debates enhanced by PRR movements.

2.2.2 Migration – development nexus and aid conditionality

Political nexuses are a policymaking concept used to describe interlinkages of two related policy fields and how shifts in one affect the other field. Followingly, the debates around the migration – development nexus are discussed.

Political discourse on foreign aid in donor states has become increasingly intertwined with migration governance objectives, especially since the Syrian influx of refugees in 2015 triggered Europe to identify this as a security risk (Günther & Brugger, 2021). However, even before then, development cooperation's utility as a tool for addressing the root causes of migration had been proclaimed (Bakewell, 2008). With this 'nexus', development cooperation merges into migration management for donor nations' stabilisation and security objectives (Collyer, 2026).

The underlying assumption for this policy nexus is that improving economic conditions in countries of origin reduces migration pressures. However, there is little to no empirical evidence supporting this relationship (Bakewell, 2008; Clemens & Mendola, 2020; Lavenex et al., 2021). In fact, scientific evidence points to a U-shaped relationship between the level of economic development and the extent of emigration: first, it leads to an increase in emigration and only in the long-term and at a relatively high stage of development does it decrease (De Haas, 2010; Lavenex et al., 2021). Bakewell (2008) claims that such approaches to contain individual's movements geographically reflects an enduring tendency within donor country policies to prioritise migration control over actual development goals.

Additionally, linking the provision of funds to the condition of emigration countries readmitting their citizens and cooperating on other migration-policy-related issues is a tool used in restrictive migration policies of donor countries, including Switzerland (Castillejo, 2017; Lavenex et al., 2021). This aid conditionality is increasingly institutionalised. The EU's Migration Partnership Framework, for example, explicitly links aid provision to cooperation on migration management, including return agreements and border control measures (Castillejo, 2017). Similar trends can be observed across several European donor countries (Knoll & Sheriff, 2017).

As a result, development NGOs increasingly operate within a political environment in which their legitimacy is less tied to humanitarian objectives of solidarity and more to its supposed contribution to migration management and border governance.

2.2.3 Security – development nexus: Development for national security

Development cooperation has also been reframed through the national security – policy nexus, transforming the role of development aid within donors' foreign policy strategies. It is closely related to the migration – development nexus, but slightly differs: its narratives define entire aid-receiving 'fragile states' as security risks to the donor, not just individual migrants from there (Günther & Brugger, 2021). As these fragile contexts could erupt into conflict at any time and then pose security risks in various ways, including the influx of migrants from there to the donor nation, development cooperation should support peacebuilding efforts and stabilise these contexts. Therefore, neglecting poverty reduction and international solidarity per se as motivations, development cooperation is positioned as an instrument for managing local instability and geopolitical risks (Brown & Grävingholt, 2016).

An early analysis of this interlinkage described how it was already integrated into wider strategies of governing insecurity beyond national borders at the time (Duffield, 2001). Duffield (2014) later demonstrated how this merging of development and security logics has repositioned development cooperation as a systematic global risk management tool for donor nations.

Tensions between human security and national security framings in these policies are becoming more evident: while earlier development paradigms emphasised poverty alleviation and livelihoods protection for human security purposes, donor policies increasingly prioritise regional stabilisation and conflict prevention, particularly after 9/11 (Howell & Lind, 2009a). Donor expectations towards actors such as NGOs shifted as well, claim Howell & Lind (2009b), with funding increasingly directed towards programmes supporting governance reform, resilience and counter-extremism objectives.

Thus, the political environment development NGOs operate in demands them to not just contribute to anti-migration goals, but also to the national security objective by stabilising and making resilient local 'fragile' contexts.

2.2.4 Securitisation as prioritising defence over development

Another more recent use of the term ‘securitisation’ concerns not the modalities or purposes of development cooperation as such, but its neglect vis-à-vis more pressing, imminent and more geographically closer ongoing conflicts. Reactive responses to immediate crises such as increasing military defences are prioritised over preventive long-term engagement. Geopolitical shocks such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have reinforced crisis proximity effects, whereby geographically close conflicts receive much greater political attention and funding priority than more distant humanitarian emergencies (Wajner et al., 2024; Welch & Laub, 2025). This shift contributes to competition between defence spending and international cooperation budgets, particularly under fiscal pressure. Research from Hackenesch et al. (2021) on European foreign relations shows that development policy is increasingly shaped by considerations of neighbourhood stability and geopolitical rivalry.

Hence, securitisation in this sense normalises trade-offs between defence and development priorities in favour of the former in periods of heightened geopolitical uncertainty.

2.3 Political demands for development NGO operations

In the following section, I outline scholarly debates on two prominent themes of political change that emerged in my interviews as affecting development NGOs.

2.3.1 Accountability demands and corporatisation of aid

Since the 1990s, NGOs have assumed an increasingly prominent role in states’ development cooperation strategies through the opportunity they pose to share implementation responsibilities (Bebbington, 2005). Meanwhile, their growing importance within publicly funded aid systems generated stronger demands for managerial governance reforms centred on transparency, accountability and performance measurement (Eyben, 2014; Girei, 2023). Rather than acting as advocacy-oriented civil society actors, NGOs are increasingly positioned as implementing partners and are expected to demonstrate performance through standardised monitoring and evaluation procedures (Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

Relatedly, private sector engagement and public-private partnerships (PPPs) are increasingly expected from NGOs. A plethora of research shows that private actors, such as profit-oriented businesses, companies and multinational corporations (MNCs), are increasingly positioned as central development agents, reflecting a sector-wide normative shift that places market-based instruments and corporate partnerships at the core of development efforts (Girei, 2023; Lambert, 2020; Landolt, 2021; Lie, 2024; Mawdsley, 2015, 2018; Molina-Gallart, 2014; Rosenman, 2019).

The promotion of such PPPs has also expanded expectations for NGOs to adhere to results-based management approaches. Quantitative indicators, evaluation systems and impact measurement tools have gained increasing importance (D. Baur & Schmitz, 2012), narrowing space for development NGOs to adopt critical perspectives on their own engagement, as Eyben (2014) argues. By privileging technical reporting, reflexive learning and long-term partnership-building takes a backseat. Relatedly, Girei (2023) shows that managerial accountability systems privilege donor interests and quantifiable outputs over longer-term transformative goals such as embedding local knowledge and participatory decision-making processes in local contexts. Therefore, many NGO practitioners frequently report tensions when considering partnership-based funding opportunities such as PPPs across from organisational independence (Molina-Gallart 2014).

Tellingly for the institutionalisation of the private sector's involvement, the Swiss ICS 2025-2028 promotes evidence-based decision-making through sector-wide standardised indicators and digital monitoring instruments (FDFA, 2025).

In sum, these corporate governance reforms reshape NGO roles by heightening expectations regarding monitoring, evaluation and private-sector collaboration while narrowing their political and organisational autonomy.

2.3.2 Localisation and decolonisation debates

Debates on localisation and decolonisation of development cooperation challenge longstanding hierarchies in the relationships between aid donors and recipients. Localisation refers to strengthening the role of local actors in Global South countries in agenda-setting, funding allocation and implementation processes within development systems (Glennie et al., 2012; Glennie & Rabinowitz, 2013). Relatedly, decolonisation addresses structurally racialised,

neocolonial power asymmetries embedded in international aid relationships, so as to facilitate effective localisation (Peace Direct, 2021). In practice, this means becoming aware of and adjusting perspectives, framings, terminologies and definitions to uproot entrenched systemic issues and ultimately shift authority away from the Global North (Peace Direct, 2021, 2022).

Despite widespread policy commitments, progress towards localisation remains uneven. Donors face administrative constraints, risk-averse funding practices and accountability requirements that limit the transfer of resources and decision-making authority to local actors (Pinnington et al., 2024). Empirical research further shows that localisation processes rarely involve linear shifts of authority but instead produce hybrid arrangements where both international NGOs and local actors, not just the latter, renegotiate roles and responsibilities (Décobert, 2020; Décobert & Wells, 2025).

As for PPPs, localisation principles are promoted in Switzerland's ICS 2025–28 (FDFA, 2025), and advocacy for these efforts is increasing. In practice, development NGOs enact localisation agendas by repositioning themselves within aid networks rather than withdrawing altogether, highlighting their agile strategic adaptation techniques.

3 Swiss Political and Institutional Context

This chapter provides an important informative background. It frames trends and events in the Swiss political landscape over the past 20 odd years of relevance to the Swiss development sector. Furthermore, it introduces the unique characteristics and institutional framework of the Swiss political context, with a focus on development NGOs role within. This contextualises my research, along with the scholarly debates from the previous chapter.

I outline these topics in the following 7 sections: firstly, section 3.1 provides a general and historical overview of the Swiss development sector. Secondly, section 3.2 introduces key elements of the Swiss political system. Thirdly, section 3.3 describes the Swiss development architecture and NGOs' roles and dependencies within. In section 3.4, I show how parliamentary decision-making shapes budgetary outcomes and NGOs' thematic and regional orientations. Section 3.5 provides an

overview of political shifts with effects on the development sector in Switzerland. The focal points here include more confrontational dynamics, the SVP and the PRR turn, national security concerns, migration issues, and constraining funding regulations. Section 3.6 summarises the chapter.

3.1 Comparative and Historical Context

Switzerland is a mid-sized donor in absolute terms, but a comparatively generous one relative to its population and economic size. As a member of the OECD's DAC since 1968, it has maintained a long-standing commitment to official development assistance (ODA) (OECD, n.d.-a, 2025). Since 2000, Swiss ODA has increased substantially in absolute terms (World Bank, n.d.). When viewed as a percentage of Gross National Income (GNI), it also increased, yet to a much lesser degree than in absolute terms. To illustrate, it provided approximately USD 4 billion in ODA in 2024, equivalent to around 0.49% of GNI. However, the 2025 budget dropped to USD 3.8 billion and 0.46% of GNI (SDC, 2026). This placed Switzerland above many OECD donors in relative terms, though below the UN defined target of 0.7% and behind countries such as Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands (OECD, 2026)³. For a country of Switzerland's population size, this makes it a politically significant public expenditure (FDFA, 2025).

Development NGOs global rise to prominence in the development sector during the 1990s reflected their position in Switzerland as well. They gained increasing prominence as donors placed greater emphasis on participation, poverty reduction, humanitarian response, and civil society partnerships (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Lewis & Kanji, 2009). In Switzerland, this shift built on pre-existing traditions of humanitarian solidarity, missionary networks, and internationally oriented civil society engagement. Since 2007, the SDC engages with Swiss development NGOs in

³ The Swiss ODA numbers vary between the OECD and SDC websites cited. This is due to this SDC website's exclusion and the OECD one's exclusion of so-called 'in-donor refugee costs'. They are meant to cover expenditure on refugee support services in aid-donor countries.

In line with OECD standards, DAC donors may also include these costs in its ODA budget (OECD, n.d.-b). This practice has evoked much controversy (for examples see Knoll & Sheriff, 2017; Mawdsley et al., 2025; Merrick, 2025). Critics claim these costs divert funds from effecting poverty reduction and long-term development to domestic national interests. They make ODA allocations seem larger while not effectively committing more to real development purposes.

a strategic partnership model (SDC, 2019). This institutionalised NGOs formally as actors within national aid strategies and more broadly as meaningful channels through which Swiss society engages with global inequality (SDC, 2023; The Federal Council, 2023).

Swiss development cooperation operates within a distinct domestic political setting (described in section 3.2 below). Its institutional features make aid policy especially sensitive to domestic political debate and changing public priorities (Sciarini, 2023; Stadelmann-Steffen & Leemann, 2023). At the same time, Switzerland reflects wider trends visible across OECD donors, where development cooperation increasingly competes with other spending priorities and is expected to demonstrate tangible national benefits (OECD, 2026; SDC, 2026). The Swiss case is therefore both nationally distinctive and representative of broader changes in contemporary aid politics.

3.2 Key features of Swiss political system

Switzerland is a peculiar democracy in Western Europe, which has earned it the designation of “Spezialfall” (special case) (Church, 2016). Features include a consensus-oriented democracy, a decentralised federalist governance system and direct democratic processes enabling a high level of agency for citizens and other actors to influence political decisions (Linder & Steffen, 2006; Vatter, 2014). They differentiate the Swiss polity from other OECD members, confronting Swiss development NGOs with a markedly different scope of action compared to their counterparts elsewhere.

3.2.1 Consensus democracy

Switzerland is a paradigm of consensus democracy, marked by power-sharing, decentralisation, and a strong emphasis on collaborative, negotiated decision-making (Julian. Bernauer & Vatter, 2019; Lijphart, 1999; Linder & Steffen, 2006; Sciarini et al., 2015). Executive power is distributed equally among the seven-member Federal Council, a coalition of all major political parties (Linder & Steffen, 2006; Papadopoulos & Sager, 2023). Each Federal Councillor heads one of the 7 government ministries. Ignazio Cassis, one of the two liberal party (FDP) Councillors, currently heads the FDFA (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), the relevant ministry to development NGOs institutional involvement (The Federal Council, n.d.).

Consensus orientation is also reflected in the bicameralism of the Swiss Parliament, meaning the division of the Federal Assembly into two equally powerful chambers: the National Council ('Nationalrat') and the Council of States ('Ständerat') (Vatter, 2023). Both have the exact same competences and members of Parliament (MPs) are elected for 4-year terms (Linder & Steffen, 2006; Papadopoulos & Sager, 2023).

Furthermore, unlike many parliamentary systems, both Swiss Parliament chambers are consensually designed in a so-called 'consociational' form. This means they do not consist of a governing majority of MPs across from an oppositional minority, but seats are awarded proportionally to every party's share of votes (Bundeskanzlei, n.d.; Linder, 2004). This form further reinforces the democratic consensus orientation, stemming from the country's pluralistic history with linguistic, religious and cultural divisions (Lehmbruch, 1993; Lijphart, 1999). This system of sharing and balancing political power and influence between various minority stakeholders has proved key to national cohesion (Linder & Steffen, 2006). This consensual institutional design circumscribes the political space development NGOs act in.

3.2.2 Federalism

Switzerland's pronounced federalism allocates substantial autonomy to the cantonal and municipal levels (Vatter, 2023). This autonomy emerged historically through 'non-centralisation' (Vatter, 2023). Political authority is thus fragmented and complicated, but simultaneously policymaking is embedded within a large network of institutional arrangements and actors that is supposed to create balance and stability (Vatter, 2023).

3.2.3 Direct democracy

A cornerstone of the Swiss political system are its direct democratic instruments such as referenda or popular initiatives, which distribute agenda-setting powers (Stadelmann-Steffen & Leemann, 2023). Individual politicians, parties and civil society groups can bring issues directly to the electorate through these mechanisms (Stadelmann-Steffen & Leemann, 2023). Linder (2007) describes direct democracy as awarding the people the final say in most important issues, while Parliament "decides on laws" and the government on less important issues, such as decrees and ordinances (Sager & Zollinger, 2011: 28). While this enhances democratic participation, it also

makes decisions susceptible to public opinion. It provides opportunities for public mobilisation around salient issues, including migration and international engagement (Ernst et al., 2016), topics that concern Swiss development NGOs.

To summarise, these institutional features (consensus orientation, federalism and direct democracy) create a political system that is both highly participatory and structurally fragmented. They impact development NGOs as actors in a contested, publicly sensitive policy field.

3.3 NGOs and the Swiss institutional development framework

Swiss institutional development cooperation is organised in a multi-actor framework where state agencies, Parliament, NGOs, and international organisations interact to shape both policy and its implementation. At the core are the SDC and the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), which together are responsible for the allocation and implementation of Switzerland's ODA (FDFA, 2020, 2025). While the SDC is responsible for coordination of humanitarian aid and long-term development cooperation, SECO plays a complementary role in economic cooperation and private sector engagement. They allocate the majority of the ODA budget according to the strategic guidelines of the ICS (FDFA, 2025). The ICS is the principal policy for Swiss ODA distribution, yet as a member of OECD's DAC, Switzerland also adheres to its standards and objectives (OECD, n.d.-a).

In my interviews, SDC's allocations of ODA to NGOs are framed as indispensable for them. Yet, they constitute only a small part of the ODA budget that SDC administers: most is allocated bilaterally, i.e. directly to other governments, or to multilateral organisations, i.e. World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, etc. (FDFA, 2025).

3.3.1 NGOs as implementing partners of SDC

The SDC values Swiss development NGOs as implementing and collaborative partners (SDC, 2023) (see section 3.1.). They carry out projects and programmes on the ground for SDC (FDFA, 2025).

The SDC provides three funding mechanisms: firstly, targeted contributions are tied to specific projects or thematic initiatives that NGOs design themselves. As long as they align with SDC's thematic and regional strategies, NGOs are eligible for these contributions (SDC, 2025). Secondly, core or programme contributions are grants for international programme portfolios of NGOs, allowing them to “respond flexibly to changing situations” on the ground (SDC, 2023: 10). These subsidies are reserved for “large NGOs”, “Swiss NGO umbrella organisations” and “Swiss NGO alliances” (SDC, 2023: 15). Furthermore, SDC advertises mandates, “contractual arrangements to provide services” (SDC, 2023), which NGOs can apply for through a public tendering process. Logically, the more tenders a NGO wins, the more meaningful this funding mechanism becomes.

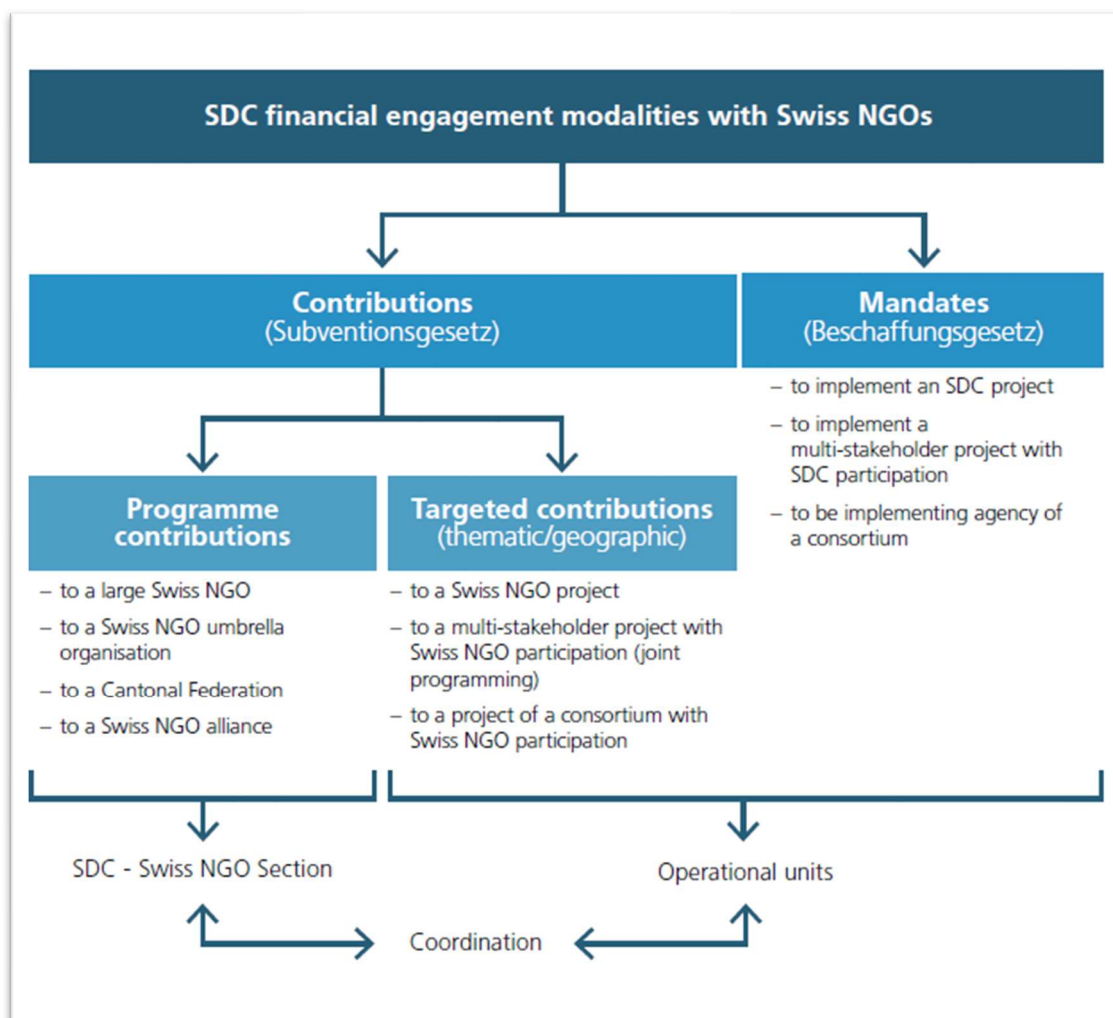


Figure 1: SDC financial engagement modalities with Swiss NGOs (SDC, 2023)

These funding mechanisms allow for both strategic steering by the state and a degree of operational autonomy for NGOs. Moreover, after obtaining these subsidies, NGOs must file detailed reports on the achievement of objectives (SDC, 2023; The Federal Council, 2023).

3.3.2 NGOs' financial and orientation interdependencies

In practice, development NGOs depend on various financial sources somewhat equally. An SDC annual report on an NGO (which I was granted exclusive access to from one of my interviewees) showed a significant portion of its budget came from public donations. Since development NGOs are not allowed to finance more than 30% of their international programme budget through SDC contributions anyway, such funding realities are not surprising (see SDC, 2023: 16)⁴. Helvetas' public annual NGO reporting reflects this, too: it describes SDC programme contributions as one of many financial sources that enable long-term engagement and organisational continuity (Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation, 2024). As a result, it should not be forgotten that NGOs are not only passive recipients of SDC subsidies but political actors within their own right.

Nevertheless, while they retain organisational identities and integrity, NGOs are still closely linked to and rely on SDC's funding priorities and policies. My interviewees reiterated this point often. Research also suggests that when NGOs rely on public funding, patterns of NGOs 'self-financed' operations tend to match the strategic orientations of their ODA benefactors (Nunnenkamp et al., 2009). Swiss development cooperation should thus be understood as an interconnected system of state and non-state actors, rather than as two separate spheres.

3.4 Parliament in the Swiss institutional development framework

Parliamentary decision-making processes are impactful in the Swiss development architecture, as they determine both the scale and the direction of public funding that SDC then implements. Parliament must approve a new ICS every 4 years and influences its objectives, thematic priorities, and geographic focus areas (FDFA, 2020, 2025). Financial commitments to the strategy's efforts are

⁴ Other financial sources for the undisclosed NGO's international programmes include "contributions from public authorities", "private contributions – third parties" and "direct donations".

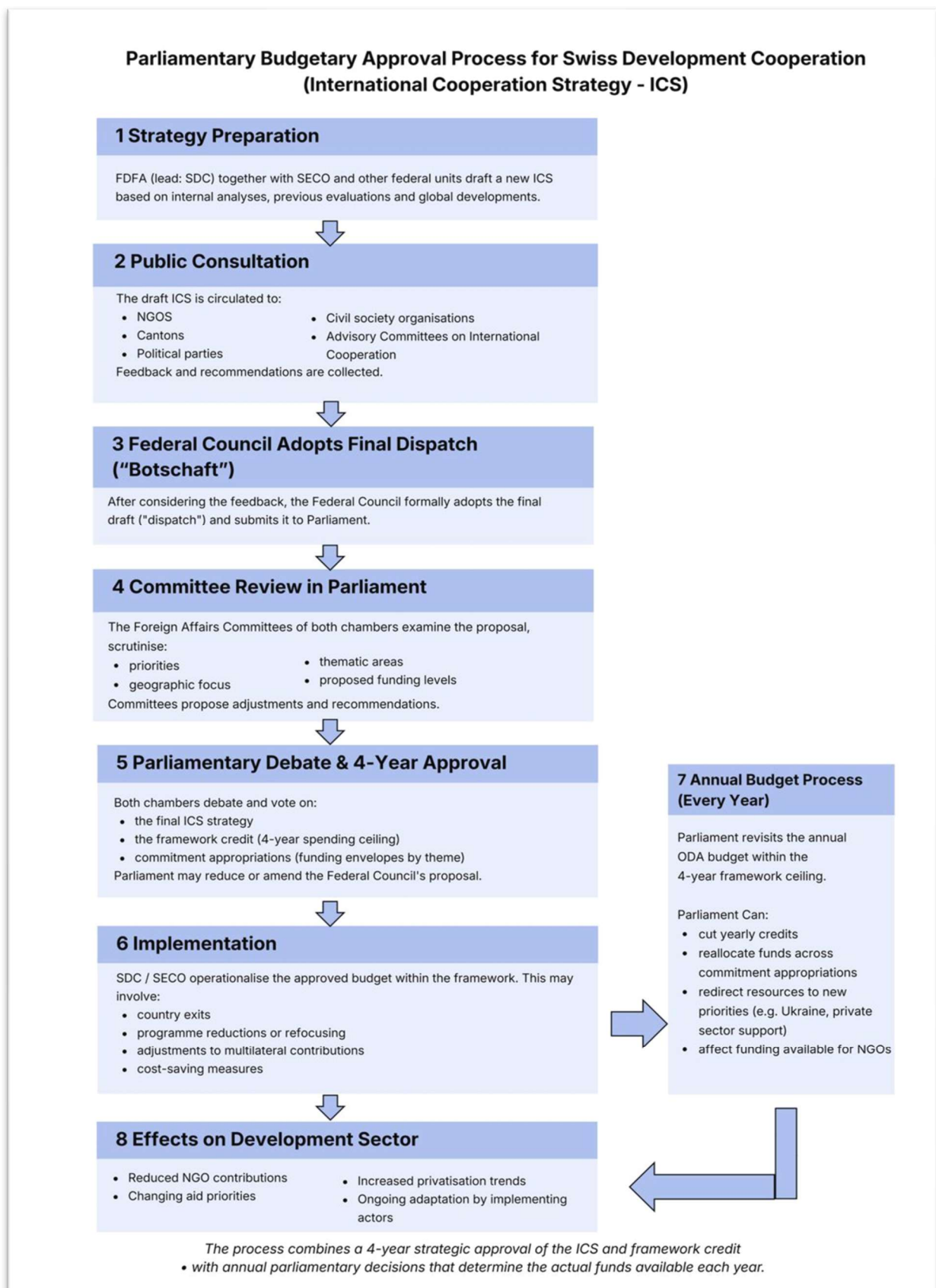


Figure 2: Parliamentary ICS approval process (Author 2026)

reevaluated annually. Figure 2 visualises the steps of the multi-stage and multi-stakeholder ICS

approval process.

Followingly, I outline this complex process.

3.4.1 Conception of ICS: FDFA drafts and Federal Council-approved ‘dispatch’

The parliamentary ICS approval process begins with the SDC, who work with SECO and other federal units to draft a preliminary version of the next ICS in the name of the Federal Council and the FDFA (FDFA, 2025; The Federal Council, 2024). They draft the strategy based on internal analyses, previous strategy evaluations, and global developments, and make sure it aligns with Switzerland’s broader foreign policy framework (The Federal Council, 2024, 2025).

Next, a public consultation phase follows, circulating the ICS draft among NGOs, cantons, political parties, civil society organisations, and other stakeholders (FDFA, 2025). Both parliamentary chambers’ Advisory Committees on International Cooperation (AC-IC) review the strategy as well and provide recommendations (FDFA, 2025; SDC, 2025c). This consultation process ensures that the strategy already reflects a wide range of political and societal positions before it reaches Parliament. After acknowledging and/or incorporating this feedback, the Federal Council formally adopts the final draft (‘dispatch’ or “Botschaft” in German) and submits it to Parliament for approval (OECD, 2025; The Federal Council, 2024).

3.4.2 Parliamentary debate and alterations for final 4-year ICS

Once submitted, the parliamentary decision-making phase begins. The dispatch’s content and financial suggestions are debated in parliamentary plenary sessions. The ICS structures its finances through a framework credit system, which sets a total expenditure ceiling for the four-year period and is divided into several ‘commitment appropriations’ (essentially thematic focus areas for funds) (FDFA, 2025)⁵.

⁵ For the 2025-2028 period, Parliament ultimately approved a framework credit of CHF 11.12 billion. This amount was CHF 151 million less than the CHF 11.27 billion suggested in the ‘dispatch’ (FDFA, 2025). Additionally, and as a new commitment appropriation, CHF 1.5 billion was dedicated to humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in the Ukraine (FDFA, 2025) (see section 3.6.3). Given this allocation category did not

Consequently, the SDC works out how to strategically adapt to the altered financial situation (The Federal Council, 2025). This led to decisions such as ending of bilateral engagements with Albania, Bangladesh and Zambia last year, the reduction or refocusing of collaborations with UN multilateral organisations, along with other measures that reduce operating costs (SDC & SECO, 2024).

3.4.3 Annual budgetary decisions

Parliament's influence on the ODA budget is not done there. Even after the framework credit is approved, Parliament still retains influence through the annual budget process, which determines the actual funds available each year. The framework credit defines only a maximum spending across four years: Parliament can and does reduce or reallocate funds across the different commitment appropriations during its year-end budget debates (SDC & SECO, 2024). These decisions finally determine the resources available for development cooperation purposes (FDFA, 2025).

For example, at the end of 2024, a reduction of the 2025 ODA budget by another CHF 110 million was approved, while a further CHF 321 million are to be cut from 2026 to 2028 (Missbach, 2024; Mugglin, 2025). This resulted in 10% less federal funding for Swiss NGOs in 2025 (Keystone-SDA, 2025). These are the cuts that my interviewees primarily reference when talking about government budget cuts.

More recently, the trend has continued, albeit to a slightly lesser degree: another approximately CHF 59 million will be stripped away from development cooperation purposes in the 2026 annual budget (Missbach, 2025). This money will be redirected into economic cooperation funds aimed at supporting Swiss private companies engaged in exports to Ukraine (Missbach, 2026). This in turn exemplifies the trend of increasing corporatisation in the development sector⁶ (see section 2.3.1.).

exist in the 2021-2024 ICS yet (FDFA, 2020), it factually represented a massive funding cut for development cooperation activities.

⁶ For an in-depth look on how the corporatisation of aid, through incentivisation of the sector's actors to engage more with the private sector through PPPs, manifests in Switzerland and how this is viewed by Swiss international cooperation stakeholders, see Landolt's (2021) work.

3.5 Political shifts in Switzerland

In this chapter, I zero in on the political shifts in Switzerland of relevance to development NGOs over roughly the past 20 years.

3.5.1 From consensus to confrontation

Gradually but significantly, Switzerland has transformed from a highly consensual political environment to a more competitive and polarised political environment (Church, 2016; Dolea et al., 2021; Ernst et al., 2016; Kriesi, 2015; Riaño & Wastl-Walter, 2006; Wyss et al., 2015). Increasing inter-party conflicts have weakened traditional patterns of compromise and introduced more confrontation into parliamentary and public debates (Kriesi, 2015; Mach et al., 2021). Deliberative complexity has declined, empirical studies suggest, making debates more simplistic and adversarial (Wyss et al., 2015). These developments put consensus under increasing strain, while conflict and contestation are ever more prominent. These shifts affect development NGOs' public and political support: opposed actors increasingly undermine NGOs' legitimacy in confrontational debates, which requires advocates to continuously and effectively defend them.

3.5.2 Rightward political trend

A central driver of the consensus-to-confrontation dynamic has been the rise of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) (Dolea et al., 2021; Kriesi, 2015; Mach et al., 2021; Sager & Zollinger, 2011). Its populist narratives find favourable conditions in Switzerland and mobilise support – to great success – around issues framed as the will of “the virtuous people” (Ernst et al., 2016: 2). A key focus is on preserving Switzerland's “cultural independence and national sovereignty against immigration and EU integration” (Ernst et al., 2016: 2-3). Over time, this has also radicalised more moderate parties rightward such as the FDP regarding national sovereignty, fiscal restraint, and scepticism toward international engagement, including development cooperation (FDP, 2023).

3.5.3 Political economy constraints and national security concerns

Fiscal conservatism shapes many debates over public spending in Switzerland (Soguel, 2014). The culture of restrained public expenditure is deeply embedded: the comparative weakness of the federal government with respect to the cantonal governments and the dominance of business elites

and liberal parties historically promoted limited state intervention (Mach et al., 2021). This is typified in the electorate's overwhelming approval of a 'debt brake' in 2003, an institutional measure "to avert chronic structural imbalances" and "stabilise or reduce the debt ratio" in federal government finances (*Debt Brake (Financial Policy, Foundations)*, 2025).

Conservative actors argue that strict budget discipline is essential to maintain economic stability and intergenerational fairness (Salvi, 2024; SVP, 2024). By contrast, leftist actors criticise this as overly restrictive and undermining public interests (Missbach et al., 2025; SP, 2024). They stress how greater budget flexibility would not endanger future state finances but would solve issues such as rising costs of living and inflation.

Growing national security concerns, heightened by the Ukraine conflict, have multiplied calls for increasing defence budgets (de Senarclens, 2026; "Erhöhung Der Armeeausgaben Unter Einhaltung Des Finanzhaushaltgesetzes", 2023). This has created tensions for conservative pro-military actors, who also support the debt brake but now find it blocking the increasing of military budgets. Despite evidence that slightly altering the debt brake could unlock "more than enough [funds] to cover the additional costs arising from war and crises without jeopardising [Switzerland's] future" (Missbach & Gross, 2025: para. 4), no changes to its modalities have been made. Nevertheless, these calls for increasing defence budgets show how proximity of regional conflicts heighten national security concerns, making political actors prioritise short-term defence spending over other long-term security concerns, which development cooperation supposedly curbs (Mugglin, 2025; Salzmann, 2022) (see section 2.2.3 & 3.6.5).

Persistent parliamentary pressure to prioritise the war in Ukraine also led the SDC to adjust the ICS to include large-scale commitments for humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts in Ukraine (FDFA, 2025). Importantly for development NGOs, however, this ODA Ukraine budget was redistributed from development cooperation purposes, reducing SDC funding available to them. Again, development is framed as expendable and subordinated to defence, despite its supposed national security benefits.

3.5.4 The migration – development policy nexus in Switzerland

Migration has become highly politicised in Switzerland over the last 20 years. Studies show Swiss political migration debates being closely tied to national identity and belonging (Dolea et al., 2021; Gilardi et al., 2022; Kriesi, 2015; Riaño & Wastl-Walter, 2006). Given the SVP's anti-migration propaganda, these findings are unsurprising and match similar contexts in other Western European countries (see section 2.2.1). This has contributed to the expectation that Swiss development cooperation should also serve anti-migration purposes (Collyer, 2026; Fopp, 2024).

SDC's strategic frameworks reflect this, defining “reducing the causes of flight and irregular migration” (FDFA, 2025: 16) as a core objective. The ICS states...

“since the 2021-24 period, the Federal Council has included migration in the ICS as a transversal topic, thus responding to Parliament's calls to establish strategic links between policy areas. Especially in the current context, where the Swiss asylum system is impacted by significant challenges and high spending, it is important for part of international cooperation to directly address the migration challenges facing our country” (FDFA, 2025: 16)

Such formulations demonstrate successful linking of aid provision with migration reduction in policymaking. Switzerland now prioritises regions of origin of migrants and transit countries for domestic migration control. This logic reflects a shift from needs-based to politically conditioned allocations (Bakewell, 2008).

Relatedly, the SDC strategically promotes aid conditionality, forcing aid recipient states to implement migrant return agreements or border control measures to receive development aid (Gschwend, 2021; Working Group on Switzerland's 2028 Foreign Policy Vision, 2020). Migration has therefore become a lens to evaluate and politicise development NGO engagements through.

3.5.5 The security – development nexus in Switzerland

The national security – development policy nexus is present in Swiss development policy, too (SDC, 2018) (see section 2.2.3). Switzerland enjoys a good reputation for mediating conflicts and building peace: it “is part of the country's foreign policy DNA” (Working Group on Switzerland's 2028 Foreign Policy Vision, 2020: 31). The ICS emphasises “the direct influence of international security and stability on Switzerland's prosperity” (FDFA, 2025; SDC, 2024: para. 4). The strategic

vision-setting, agenda-framing foreign policy roadmap AVIS28 maintains how “peacebuilding and development cooperation” should be “closely linked” in Swiss development engagements to benefit national security interests (Working Group on Switzerland’s 2028 Foreign Policy Vision, 2020: 33).

This securitising focus of institutional development efforts affects development NGOs’ own strategic orientations (see section 3.4).

3.5.6 Restriction of political agency of NGOs and civil society

Recent parliamentary debates increasingly questioned development NGOs’ political role and the legitimacy of their advocacy or awareness-raising/sensitisation activities. SDC’s regulatory adaptations in 2021 reflected this: SDC funds awarded to NGOs are no longer allowed to be used for domestic sensitisation or awareness campaigns. This includes publishing brochures about their engagements and drafting teaching materials for schools, effectively depoliticising NGOs (Danzi, 2021; SDC & SECO, 2024: 16). While other interest groups such as the Swiss national agricultural association and the dairy and meat production cooperatives receive handsome government subsidies for just these purposes, development NGOs are excluded and effectively politically muzzled, and struggle to generate funds for these important activities (Schmid, 2021). Such measures indicate how civil society and NGOs’ political engagement space is narrowing.

3.6 Chapter Summary

Switzerland has a complex multi-layered governance structure of development engagement: the Federal Council together with administrative actors designs and proposes strategies, but Parliament continuously shapes their implementation through both long-term framework credits and short-term annual budget decisions. In practice, this means that agencies such as the SDC must adapt their programmes to changing financial conditions. The system therefore allows Parliament’s sustained influence over development cooperation.

The political shifts and trends affect these dynamics. As political competition has intensified and consensus-oriented practices have weakened, Parliament has become more polarised, and antagonistic actors to development cooperation have gained more influence (Kriesi, 2015; Wyss et

al., 2015). At the same time, the geopolitical crisis in the Ukraine has brought greater scrutiny to issues such as development cooperation, now more frequently framed in terms of costs, benefits, and national interests.

Together, governance structures and other elements work together relationally, influencing each other in non-linear, fluid ways. This then shapes development NGOs' their scopes of action within the political setting.

4 Conceptual Framework

I followingly outline the conceptual framework I used to analyse my data. As my research question states, I want to find out how Swiss NGOs adapt their operative strategies, narrative framings and organisational practices in response to domestic political shifts. Positioned complexly within state, market and civil society structures, development NGOs hold unique positions in the Swiss political landscape.

I take inspiration from two conceptual lenses: **assemblage and brokerage theory**. Although they differ in emphasis, they converge around the idea that NGOs operate within dynamic, relational, and politically charged environments shaped by various competing forms of power and knowledge. While assemblage theory captures the wider relational configuration, brokerage theory focuses on how NGOs and their representatives as actors exercise agency and mediate and negotiate within these configurations.

Firstly, **assemblage theory** as the **macro-level** ontology helps conceptualise NGOs as actors embedded in a complex web of relations and interactions fraught with power imbalances and various interaction modes. These constellations of heterogeneous elements are not permanently fixed but are constantly being (re)produced, reconfigured, (re)negotiated, and (re)defined by involved entities (Müller, 2015). Secondly, **brokerage theory** highlights actors who mediate between different representations, interests or resources, providing a meso-level analytical lens (Mosse & Lewis, 2006). Its ideas are particularly useful for tracing how NGO actors negotiate competing, external expectations and pressures, for example by forging alliances or by adjusting

communication strategies. Additionally, **Katz's (2004) concepts of reworking, resistance, and resilience** supplement my conceptual lens, providing greater focus on everyday practices that adapt in the face of larger-scale political forces. This aids in interpreting **micro-level** operative and strategic adjustments of NGOs.

Together, these concepts create a multi-dimensional lens to understand adaptation of NGOs to political shifts as a process that is dynamic, emergent, relational, and meaning-making.

The chapter is structured as follows: Section 4.1 discusses assemblage theory's conceptual underpinnings and its suitability for understanding NGO adaptation, while Section 4.2 examines development brokerage's advantages of understanding agentive adaptation capacities of NGOs within assemblages. Section 4.3 explains why the conceptual framework is useful for my research question and Section 4.4 synthesises these perspectives into a productive analytical lens to dissect my interviews with.

4.1 Origins of Assemblage Theory: NGOs as Adaptive Configurations

In fields related to political geography, assemblage theory has become increasingly influential when thinking about configurations of heterogeneous, processual and emergent nature (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020). Popularised by human geography's turn of attention to the "everyday" (Megoran, 2006), Page (2020) defines an assemblage as "the coming-together of human and non-human 'things' that take on an emergent agency" as a whole (2020: 223). The theory originates from political philosophy scholars Deleuze & Guattari (1987), who theorised assemblages as being made up of heterogeneous components that 'cofunction' together, whose relations to each other are always in flux and mutually rely on each other to unfold their potential (Page, 2020). These components can be materials, affects, discourses, other humans, and more.

Notably, DeLanda (2006) emphasises the interactions between these components, naming them 'relations of exteriority' (Müller, 2015; Page, 2020), and asserts that assemblages come to life depending on the way the relations between its components are fashioned. DeLanda (2006) helps to highlight elements constituting NGOs, such as actors, discourses, funding streams, and

institutional arrangements, as retaining a degree of autonomy and as reconfigurable. It allows NGO adaptation to be analysed as a process of recombining of relations between these elements rather than as change within an NGO's fixed organisational structure.

However, assemblages do not simply emerge or exist by themselves: they are a deliberate coming together of components to do something (Buchanan 2015, 2017). This brings considerations of power structures into assemblages, as Buchanan (2015) maintains. He criticises DeLanda's conceptualisation as being merely descriptive, arguing that his view adds no analytical advantage and that agency, power dynamics and deliberateness of 'arrangements' are missing from his analyses. Buchanan's (2015: 225) "focus is more human-centric and looks at assemblage theory as a tool to pull apart what situations are and how power works in the attempt to achieve something".

Hence, the first pillar of my conceptual framework is assemblage theory within NGOs, which I use to discern the agency, power and/or influence that political changes possess inside the complex assemblages of Swiss development NGOs.

4.1.1 Assemblage Theory in Political Geography: NGOs in Adaptive Configurations

Across political geography, numerous scholars have utilised the tools of assemblage theory to better understand political spaces as processes of composition and re-composition of various actors (Allen & Cochrane, 2007; Farias & Bender, 2011; Ghoddousi & Page, 2020; McFarlane, 2009; Müller, 2015; Roberts, 2014). The elements of as well as the relations between these various socio-spatial formations that political geographers analyse are viewed as emergent, multiple and indeterminate, withstanding a simplification to any kind of fixed form (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011). Importantly, they are seen as possessing agency and are subject to power imbalances.

Central to political geography scholars' application of assemblage theory are three themes that Müller (2015) summarises: de- and reterritorialisation; power; materials, objects and technologies; and topological space. The first theme speaks to the emerging nature of assemblages, holding together and establishing orders but dynamically mutating and transforming. Furthermore, power is not concentrated within any one element or relation, but distributed across these socio-material

networks, producing “new realities” and heterogeneous relations (Müller, 2015: 29). The third theme emancipates objective entities from being seen as “passive recipients” to a role where they “co-articulate agency and shape political practices” (Müller, 2015: 34). These themes provide guidance for the way I implement assemblage theory in my analysis of Swiss development NGOs.

Assemblage theory is particularly useful for analysing complex political environments because it accounts for both stability and volatility. Ghoddousi & Page (2020) analysed how combining ethnographical research with assemblage theory moves away from “producing generalisations of phenomena” and focuses on small-scale patterns of relations and processes that forge functioning assemblages (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020: 9).

Furthermore, using assemblage’s perspective to discern key elements such as state bureaucracies, contractors, trade associations, journals, meetings, etc., Roberts (2014) looked at organisations involved in USAID’s development assistance provision network. This approach made the myriad socio-material relationships between actors visible and unveiled how the spatialisations of the ‘development industrial complex’ differentiates subjects, generates inequalities and is in a rapid state of flux (Roberts, 2014). Crucially, she highlights relations of power as something that other scholars (Hart, 2010) fear is often glossed over when using assemblage theory as an analytical lens.

These political geography studies help to think of the complex web of actors in the Swiss development sector not as fixed and stable, but as a fluid formation constituted by shifting sets of power relations between its human and non-human actors. Some examples of these active parts include people, NGOs, state agencies, policies, regulations, discourses and funding flows. As varying levels of power, influence and agency are endowed upon certain actors and elements in these assemblages, assemblage theory makes ‘relations of exteriority’ discernible.

When analysing impacts and adaptations of NGOs caused by shifts in the complex Swiss political environments, this political geography use of assemblage theory comes in handy.

4.1.2 Previous Applications to NGO Environments

In my analysis, assemblage theory thinking allows me to zero in on NGOs’ responses and adaptations brought about by exterior relational changes and realignments to political elements

and actors. Drawing these connections is imperative to cater to my research question. I outline some previous political geography scholarly work that has centred on this topic as well.

Despite not mentioning assemblage theory explicitly, Brass (2016) empirically shows that NGO to state relations form flexible compositions that reconfigure in response to political shifts. These relations are shaped by ideas and interests but also by donor policies, funding schemes, bureaucratic technologies and audit regimes. Brass (2016) finds that it is important for NGOs to deal with new reporting templates or digital monitoring systems, which shows how political reorientations, i.e. the increasing corporatisation of NGOs, manifests in NGO practices. To ensure their long-term survival, NGOs must accept such altered relationship conditions and internally adapt to these requirements. This also unearths unequal power balances, as one party makes demands and the other is required to adapt.

Development NGOs' agendas are often aimed at deep-rooted transformations of politics, social relations and markets. Despite this, Banks et al. (2015) find that they often remain stagnant as "clients" working "on a limited set of agendas biased toward service-delivery and "democracy-promotion"" (Banks et al., 2015: 708). They blame this on the challenges of adapting to the "rising tide of technocracy" (Banks et al., 2015: 708), but also due to national and international limitations. Nationally, governments may restrict civic space through regulation, surveillance, or hostility toward advocacy, pushing NGOs to remain "non-political" and cautious. Internationally, donor systems constrain NGOs through funding dependence, technocratic priorities, measurable-results agendas, and narrow definitions of legitimate civil society action. As their organisational survival depends on navigating these changes more than tackling the issues they originally set out to address, this leads to reconfigurations of the NGOs themselves and of NGO relations toward the state (Banks et al., 2015).

These studies show that assemblage theory can effectively be used for my research aim.

4.1.3 Adaptive Strategies: Reworking, resistance and resilience à Katz (2004)

Supporting assemblage theory, I include Katz's (2004) notions of reworking, resistance and resilience. Adding a more fine-tuned dimension to categorise NGO adaptations, these notions allow to identify adaptations as (1) reworking, (2) resistance, and (3) resilience (Katz, 2004). These

concepts complement assemblage theory by emphasising NGOs' concrete political agency strategies.

Drawing from feminist and critical human geography, Katz developed these concepts in her analysis of how everyday life is reshaped under conditions of global economic restructuring. She claims large-scale political-economic transformations are always mediated through local practices, social reproduction, and situated responses rather than being imposed in a uniform way. (1) Reworking refers to pragmatic efforts to improve conditions from within existing constraints; (2) resistance captures more explicit practices that contest dominant rules or power relations; and (3) resilience points to the capacities and routines through which actors endure and continue under pressure (Katz, 2004).

Applied to NGOs, this framework strengthens assemblage theory by specifying how agency operates within shifting relational configurations: while assemblage theory maps the networks, institutions, and material pressures surrounding organisations, Katz's concepts explain how actors selectively reproduce, modify, or challenge those relations through everyday practice.

In the following section, I outline how I conceptualise NGOs as wholes and individual NGO representatives as agents of brokerage in their uniquely assembled spheres of influence. This supplements my analytical use of assemblage theory.

4.2 Brokerage Theory: how 'assemblers' of assemblages mediate

Brokerage theory focuses on actors who mediate between other actors, interests and resources embedded in different social worlds across various scales. The identities and positionalities of brokers can be manifold, as anthropological scholars have used the term to designate a huge variety of actors (Bierschenk et al., 2002; Lindquist et al., 2012; Long, 2001; Mosse & Lewis, 2006; Olivier de Sardan, 2005). These scholars reveal how power circulates through assemblages by analysing how brokers navigate these dynamic relationships to arrive at desirable outcomes (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018). Brokers as "critical interlocutors in maintaining complex translocal collective relations and engagements" can stabilise or destabilise assemblages by using practices of mediation and negotiation (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018: 807).

Scholarly backing for the marrying of the two concepts in my thesis is provided by Koster & van Leynseele (2018): brokers are not merely intermediaries between complex and ‘messy’ sociopolitical realities, but active ‘assemblers’ of assemblages. They translate expectations and discourses to and from diverse interest groups and actors, thereby shaping others’ and their own agencies within these structures (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018).

Applying this view onto my analysis, NGOs become assemblers, either as individual representatives or organisational entities, that communicate between and influence the domestic political, public and civil society spheres, adhering to their strategic interests and acting within the relational assemblage’s constraints.

4.2.1 Brokerage and Power, Agency and Positionality

Given anthropological studies focus more on ground-level actors, applying this lens to entire NGOs as well as to NGO representatives that I interviewed may not seem obvious. I argue however that NGOs as entities must also mobilise support, negotiate access and interpret changing political signals. Naturally, individual NGO representatives’ positionalities figure centrally in these processes of organisational adaptation: they mobilise their knowledge and convictions as political shifts occur, to incur suitable adaptations of their NGOs as well as the entire Swiss development cooperation sector. This demands attention to power relations, and brokerage theorists accommodate for this. Mosse and Lewis (2006) and Olivier de Sardan (2005) include reflections on how brokers gain symbolic and material capital in their respective spheres of influence through their ability to connect and interpret, something that can be said of NGO representatives within their organisations, too.

Moreover, brokerage theory is also compatible with Katz’s (2004) concepts outlined above. Brokers may rework relationships and narratives to align with new conditions; resist increasing interference from other actors in NGO operations; and demonstrate resilience by ensuring continuity amid unstable circumstances. They also construct organisation-wide meanings of political shifts for NGOs when mediating and negotiating desirable outcomes, making them interpretive actors.

4.3 Suitability for my research question

The conceptual framework developed in this chapter is particularly suitable for addressing the research question of how domestic political shifts in Switzerland affect the operative strategies, narratives, and organisational practices of Swiss development NGOs

In the unique Swiss political context, characterised by participatory democracy and strong institutional interdependencies among other elements, NGOs' encounters and negotiations with different actors occur through varying modes of communication and engagement. For example, advocacy may involve certain actors when it means engaging in formal lobbying of institutions but involves other actors when using public-facing campaigns and coalition-building tactics.

Assemblage theory is valuable because it captures NGOs as dynamic configurations shaped by relations with actors such as Parliament, the SDC, umbrella organisations, donors, media, regulatory systems, and publics. Moreover, it also allows attention to these NGO – actor relations, NGOs' material relations with i.e. funding flows and reporting systems, as well as their discursive relations to migration or security framings of the development cooperation sector.

Brokerage theory complements this by focusing on how NGO actors mediate between these arenas, negotiate competing expectations, build alliances, and strategically respond to political change. These concepts together illustrate the complex ways NGOs as brokers navigate the power-imbalanced Swiss domestic political assemblage.

NGOs seek to sustain their missions under changing political conditions, which Katz's (2004) concepts of reworking, resistance, and resilience help to interpret as everyday forms of agency under constraint. Together, these approaches provide a multi-scalar, relational, and agency-centred lens that is better able to explain politically driven NGO adaptation than more static organisational models

I briefly want to mention Governance/network theory as a more static model of political geography research. The theory (see Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012; Rhodes, 2007; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007) is useful for analysing coordination among state and non-state actors, but it often treats

networks as relatively stable and cooperative arrangements, which can obscure conflict, fluidity, and unequal power relations. This is why I decided against using it for my thesis.

4.4 A Multi-Scalar Framework for Analysing NGO Adaptation

To summarise, in this conceptual framework I bring together assemblage theory as the overarching, macro-level idea that conceptualises NGOs as embedded in changing power-imbalanced relations (DeLanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Ghoddousi & Page, 2020; Roberts, 2014) with brokerage theory on a meso-level that offers a focused lens on how NGOs and their representatives mediate and negotiate these shifting relations (Koster & van Leynseele, 2018; Mosse, 2011; Mosse & Lewis, 2006; Olivier de Sardan, 2005). Katz's (2004) notions of reworking, resistance and resilience cut across both theories, enabling a nuanced, micro-level reading of my data. This results in a multi-scalar and, most importantly, relational understanding of how Swiss development NGOs adapt to political shifts.

5 Research Design and Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the methodological elements of and steps I undertook for this research project. Firstly, section 5.1 outlines how I used my conceptual framework as a theoretical lens in conjunction with interpretive approaches for a comprehensive research design. Section 5.2 then explain some issues to keep in mind regarding my personal positionality as a researcher. Thirdly, section 5.3 leads through the research process from start to finish. Section 5.4 explains how I practically analysed my interview data. I consider in section 5.5 some limitations and drawbacks of my methodology.

5.1 Research Design

My research design is characterised and influenced by my conceptual framework consisting of assemblage and brokerage approaches coupled with Katz's adaptation techniques, which I develop in the previous section (see chapter 4). The following research design translates its theoretical commitments into a practical strategy. At its core, I adopt a qualitative, interpretive research design

that is suited to exploring how NGO representatives perceive and interpret political change in Switzerland and how their NGOs respond to these changes. The interpretive (Décobert & Wells, 2020; Fujii, 2018) as well as responsive and relational approaches (Fujii, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2011) add applicable research design tools to highlight personal experiences and perceptions and collect contextually grounded information. Rather than seeking causal regularities or statistically generalisable findings, the aim was understanding how my interviewees make sense of shifting political environments and how these interpretations consequently inform organisational adaptations.

The interpretive aspect of my research design is an essential pillar of my research. Rather than treating NGO adaptations as mechanical responses to external pressures or as navigating power imbalances, as assemblage and brokerage theory highlight, interpretive methodologies comprehend them as a process grounded in subjective and context-dependent understandings (Décobert & Wells, 2020; Fujii, 2018; Kurowska & de Guevara, 2020; Yanow, 2014; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2009). Interpretive methods reflect the relative realities of individuals mediated by human interactions and the historical, cultural contexts they find themselves in (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2009). What “interpretive researchers want to work with [is] the research participants’ ‘local knowledge’ – their situated meaning – or sense-making of their own circumstances” (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2009: 35). The “sense-making” aspect also links back to the relational ideology of assemblage theory. Kurowska & de Guevara (2020) stress how this interpretation of actors making sense of the world constitutes a political act. For Swiss NGOs and their representatives, this perspective is highly relevant, because by continually interpreting policy signals, donor priorities and shifts in public and parliamentary opinions, they are active political agents in the Swiss political context.

Furthermore, the purpose of interpretive research is not to produce a singularly objective account of reality, but to understand how people intersubjectively construct the worlds in which they operate (Fujii, 2018). Fujii’s (2018) intersubjectivity underlines how interpretations emerge through social interactions rather than through individual cognition alone. This orientation is highly relevant for analysing a political context in which uncertainty, ambiguity and competing

expectations coexist. Décobert & Wells' (2020) concept of 'interpretive complexity' also speaks to this multitude of interpretations: all actors operating in contested governance settings must constantly reassess legitimacy, risk and appropriate courses of action, and there is not any one correct answer to the dilemmas that arise. While Switzerland is institutionally much more stable than the conflict setting examined by Décobert & Wells (2020), political change nonetheless generates these moments of uncertainty for development NGOs.

Methodologically, these theoretical commitments resulted in my decision to conduct expert interviews with NGO representatives, which would be guided by a semi-structured interview guideline as well as by responsive and relational interviewing approaches. Rubin & Rubin's (2011) responsive interviewing model stresses trust, mutual respect, flexibility and the co-production of understanding. Interviewees are treated not as passive subjects, but as partners whose accounts provide valuable perspectives on the research problem. Similarly, Fujii's (2018) relational approach highlights the importance of attentiveness to context, interaction and evolving conversations. In practice, this meant using an interview guide anchored in the research question. It was divided up into expected themes and aimed to break down the 'political shifts' into accessible topics for my interviewees. At the same time, it remained open to accommodate for unexpected themes and potential follow-up questions (Döringer, 2021; Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Such flexibility was essential for accessing the experiences and professional judgements of expert interviewees.

5.2 Positionality

Reflexive consideration of positionality is an important element of qualitative research because knowledge is always produced through situated interactions rather than from a neutral or detached standpoint (Holmes, 2020; Rose, 1997). In line with Fujii's (2018) relational approach, I therefore considered throughout the research process how my own cultural and personal background, assumptions and social position may have shaped access to participants, the interview dynamics and the interpretation of the collected material.

Most literature on positionality focuses on transnational, status-related, ethnic, or starkly power-imbalanced relationships between the interviewer and the interviewee. In my research, I am quite

confident in saying that such problematic characteristics were not hugely relevant. Nevertheless, some scholarly considerations on positionality are worth mentioning for my research.

One such issue was the asymmetry concerning the lived knowledge about proceedings and dynamics of the Swiss development cooperation sector. During encounters with my interviewees, they held informational authority over me regarding the subject matter, which put them in a position of control and power, as they could decide which insights became assessable in the interview (Fujii, 2018; Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Yet my position as the person shaping the consequent research would have had impacts, too. Perhaps they had reservations to speak on certain issues due to potentially controversial framings that might arise in my research project to protect themselves and their NGO (Fujii, 2018). I therefore paid close attention to framing questions as neutrally as possible during our conversations. Being a student from a well-reputed university in Switzerland might have lessened this perception and built trust, as my institutional identity would lead them to expect that my academic commitment to fact-based analysis would be of a high standard (Holmes, 2020).

Furthermore, my partial insider position likely influenced access and rapport. As a Swiss researcher familiar with local political debates, institutional structures and cultural reference points, I could communicate with interviewees on a shared basis of background knowledge. Conducting most interviews with Swiss participants and being able to switch between English, German and Swiss German in informal moments also helped create a more natural atmosphere, even if most interviews were ultimately held in English. At the same time, insider proximity can create blind spots, such as taking shared assumptions for granted or insufficiently probing statements that appear self-evident (Rose, 1997).

I also sometimes caught myself thinking that our personal opinions, values and orientations are quite similar, which may potentially have led me to frame questions in a way that pre-empted the interviewee's answer, and they conformed to that expected reply. This dynamic is important to consider. To mitigate such risks, I engaged in ongoing reflexive note-taking after interviews and remained conscious that the data generated was co-produced through our interaction rather than simply extracted from it (Holmes, 2020).

5.3 Data collection/Methodology

At the beginning of the research process, after having fleshed out my research focus and discussing ways to proceed with my supervisors, Dr Regassa gave me two of his personal contacts within the Swiss development NGO sector. Both had previously collaborated with Dr Regassa on previous projects together. After reaching out by email, I arranged meetings with them to receive their feedback about their thoughts on my proposed research. In both meetings, we primarily discussed the feasibility, the scope and the approaches needed to arrive at meaningful results. Their inputs were highly valuable, and I reflected on them throughout the conceptual and analytical processes.

We also discussed some thematic issues: One i.e. explained to me how the institutional process of funding from state budgets to Swiss development NGOs works, while the other i.e. elaborated on how certain ideological theories impact state and NGO priorities. Their insights helped me to understand the linkages between state entities, political movements and NGOs better and provided a good knowledge base of the sector to work on.

My research design implicated conducting interviews with NGO representatives as experts in their field as most fruitful to gather information (see section 5.1). This led me to consult scholarly guidance on how to conduct expert interviews effectively (Döringer, 2021; Gläser & Laudel, 2010; Helfferich, 2019; Longhurst & Johnston, 2023; Von Soest, 2023). According to Helfferich's (2019) judgements and my interpretive focus, creating a guideline that was not highly structured, but included enough room for flexibility and enabled me to explore certain issues more in-depth depending on the direction in which the interview progressed, was important. To accommodate this, I followed Helfferich's (2019) suggestion to conduct semi-structured interviews using an interview guideline and developed such a guideline (see Appendix) in line with her and Longhurst & Johnston's (2023) tips. It then served as my orientational support instrument during the expert interviews.

Next, I familiarized myself with a variety of academic literature such as research papers, books and reports while also conducting research about parliamentary proceedings, reading news articles

and NGO blogs. Consequently, I was able to redact an interview guideline for my semi-structured interview approach to create the grounds for an informative, topical conversation. Longhurst & Johnston (2023) typify semi-structured interviews as having certain guiding questions or prompts yet still allowing reactions and responses to other topics by the interviewee. This structure emphasises the actors' perceptions and interpretations, something I consider central to my research. The questions and prompts were organised into 6 central thematic areas: (1) individual's role in institutional development cooperation context of Switzerland, (2) general (Swiss) political landscape shifts, (3) shifting aid priorities and narratives, (4) impacts on NGO strategies and operations, (5) state relations and (6) personal impacts (see Appendix).

Concurring, I assembled a list of potential interview partners and reached out to them by email. My first two contacts recommended several people they either knew personally or knew of who had suitable profiles. This helped bring "greater specificity" (Fujii, 2018: 39) to the potential interviewees I was reaching out to, something Fujii describes not as "narrowing one's sights", but which "might result in expanding one's conceptualisation of who is important to interview" (Fujii, 2018: 39). I trusted their expertise and connections in the sector and that their recommendations would be valuable. I focused on employees of Swiss NGOs involved in any way in development cooperation. Originally, I considered contacting employees of government entities such as SDC or other related actors, but due to time and scope restraints, I decided to focus on development NGO representatives.

Additionally, I used a selective process, commonly used when gathering research data through relational, interpretive interviews, especially with experts (Fujii, 2018), to identify further potential interviewees. Fujii (2018: 38) states that these types of projects require "focused, intentional and mindful selection of participants". I thereby identified several further individuals that seemed appropriate through internet research.

All interviewees were contacted with a similar email, asking about their availability and willingness to participate in my study, also mentioning my preference of having a conversation in person rather than online. My reasoning for this was that this would increase levels of trust and respect between us that would be beneficial to receive more meaningful and subtle layers of

information to analyse (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I emphasised that I was asking to ‘have a conversation’ rather than an ‘interview’ with my interviewees, as this made for a more casual and relaxed atmosphere than the expectation of a rigid, strictly structured exchange. Importantly though, Johnson et al. (2021) do not rule out online interviews, leading to the arrangement of one interview on Microsoft Teams. They also state the “ideal interview data collection entails exchange, in which a person provides a narrative in exchange for the ‘interested attention’ and – at times – the views of a researcher” (Johnson et al., 2021: 14), so the more exchanges and interactions happen in a conversation, the better the quality of the interview.

I had varying responses from the contacted persons, ranging from none at all to seemingly excited to take part. Finally, I arranged meetings with 9 NGO representatives, who all worked for different NGOs, apart from two who worked for the same NGO. Involved NGOs include

Interview Code	Name (Pseudonym)	Date of Interview
IP1	Manuela	12.08.2025
IP2	Thomas	14.08.2025
IP3	Roger	26.08.2025
IP4	Christian	10.09.2025
IP5	Ursula	17.09.2025
IP6	Hans	18.09.2025
IP7	Sandra	18.09.2025
IP8	Maria	02.10.2025
IP9	Monika	08.10.2025

Table 1: Interviewee codes and names

Comundo, Helvetas, HEKS/EPER, Caritas Switzerland, Frieda – The feminist peace organisation, Alliance Sud and Vivamos. Eight interviews were held in person, while one was held on Microsoft Teams. All interviewees had relatively high-level, executive positions in their respective NGOs and relatively large responsibilities (see Table 1). Positions included ‘Director/CEO’, ‘Head of International Programmes’, ‘Continental Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean’ and ‘Senior Advocacy Advisor’. Engaging with executive staff facilitated clearer operative and strategic insights, something my research question focuses on.

Followingly, I conducted the interviews between August and October 2025. One was held in a café in Zurich, the others in the respective offices of the interviewees in three major Swiss cities. Fujii (2018) asserts that the comfort level of interviewees according to the topics discussed should be considered, so talking about their field of work at their place of work seemed sensible.

I always began by reminding the interviewee of the guarantee of confidentiality at the beginning of the conversation, that their identities would be protected and that they can refuse to answer questions or call off the interview at any point. I also asked for permission to record the conversation, which was always granted. Longhurst & Johnston (2023) suggest recording interviews to fully focus on the conversation, otherwise one feels pressured to take notes all the time. The guideline served to steer the conversation to certain topics, but I also allowed myself to probe into statements according to my momentary evaluation of their relevance.

I also asked to conduct the conversation in English. The reasoning for this was that it aided me in connecting their statements and quotes to general patterns and phenomena described in English in scholarly literature. Moreover, I presumed my interviewee’s commands of English would be quite high, given their internationally interconnected positions demand it. All but one interviewee were fine with this, with the one exception being held in German. My native English tongue was advantageous in these interactions, but it should be noted that talking in English did give the conversation a slightly more unnatural feel, due to all interview partners and me also speaking Swiss German. Later, I realised that perhaps certain nuances in expression and articulation may have got lost in translation. However, I am quite certain that the language barrier did not have any significant effects on what and how much we talked about in these conversations.

During our conversations, I made sure to incorporate elements of Fujii's (2018) relational as well as Rubin & Rubin (2011) responsive approaches. This included active listening, sacrificing total control of the direction and topics of the conversation, and not relying completely on the interview guide, but developing follow-up questions while still listening to the points being made by the interview partners. As there was lot of information to take in for me during these conversations, adhering to these principles was challenging at times: depending on the stage of the interview, the dynamics of the interaction, my clear-headedness on the day, and other circumstantial factors, my follow-up questions proved sometimes to be useful, not so fruitful or somewhere in between. The average length of the interviews was just over an hour, though never less than 50 minutes and never longer than one hour and 25 minutes.

After concluding conversations, I wrote down all the impressions and thoughts that I had at the time, for example what went well, what seemed surprising, what did not go so well, etc., in an Excel sheet. This served as a kind of research journal and helped to improve the structure and conducting of consequent interviews and as a support during the analysis.

5.4 Analysis

For the data analysis, I transcribed each interview recording in a first iteration with the transcription function on my smartphone's Voice Recorder application. I then corrected and refined the generated transcripts to reflect the actual conversation in the way it transpired. I tried to remain as true to the spoken words as possible and not correct grammar or sentence structure. These transcripts were then used to conduct a qualitative content analysis (QCA) according to Kuckartz (2019). This methodological approach enables drawing systematic and thus meaningful conclusions from empirical data (Kuckartz, 2019; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022).

Therefore, in conjunction with reading the respective transcripts, I first deduced overarching categories of the interviews from my research question and literature that matched the topics addressed in the interviews. I then relistened to the interviews again and along with rereading the transcripts, noting down thoughts about patterns and connections with theoretical and research literature I recognised and assigning them to overarching categories. While the latter step was

mainly a data-driven, inductive process which allowed subordinated categories to emerge directly from the data through step-by-step open coding, together with the prior concept-driven, deductive approach for the overarching categories, I arrived at a combined QCA methodology (Kuckartz, 2019).

Next, I imported the material into MAXQDA for a more systematic and computer-assisted qualitative analysis (Kuckartz, 2019; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022). I further refined the coding iteratively, continuously moving between data, codes and interpretation (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This resulted in a hierarchical coding structure with broader categories, themes and sub-codes. To maintain an overview, MAXQDA's coding index table function was helpful, as it labelled, defined and grouped the codes into broader clusters.

The first coding rounds focused on descriptive and visible elements in the transcripts, such as organisational roles, political developments, strategic responses, and examples of change within NGOs. Subsequent rounds adopted a more analytical focus. I examined how codes related to the theoretical background, the Swiss political context and the conceptual framework, reorganising some codes exploring connections between them. Through memo-writing and repeated engagement with the material, broader themes such as strategic adaptation, uncertainty, internal negotiation, and organisational agency became visible (Fujii, 2018).

Although interview transcripts formed the core dataset, contextual observations and reflections that I noted down in my post-interview Excel sheet as well as on paper during the interviews also informed the analysis by helping situate interview statements and enrich interpretation. Together, they formed the basis for my findings regarding my research question, which I outline in the according chapter.

5.5 Reflections on Methodology

Throughout my interviews, many different issues, topics and themes were addressed. Despite trying to adhere to my interview guideline in all conversations, which I only altered slightly for each one, there were certain talking points that arose with every person, while other points arose in most or several conversations, and yet again some issues appeared only in single instances. Some

interviews remained largely in line with my research question, and I was able to generate helpful insight into effects that political happenings, but also societal trends and other related shifts, had on the interviewee's respective NGO. In other interviews, it proved to be more difficult to control the direction of the conversation as I would have preferred it. However, since Fujii's and Rubin and Rubin's relational and responsive interview techniques guided my workflow, I had to sometimes remind myself that this was not a problem but an inherent part of my research design.

In most cases, I still managed to garner valuable insights into the worldviews, settings and ideologies from which these representatives see their own and their NGO's work from. Overall, I sometimes wished I had managed to delve deeper into more concrete changes brought about by political shifts and trends, although often one of the main impacts of these on the organisations seemed to be just that these topics were now being debated internally. Therefore, a lot of pre-empting and looking into the future was embedded in responses.

Furthermore, the scope of the thesis inhibited further interviews with a larger sample size of NGO representatives. This would have brought in further perspectives on relevant topics regarding political changes and other potentially implemented or debated adaptations in other NGOs. As such, it is important to consider the research as reflecting a relatively small number of NGO representatives' views and opinions.

6 Findings: Development NGOs in the shifting Swiss political assemblage

To comprehensively answer my research question, I identify themes and issues that came up in the nine interviews I conducted and present the interviewees' statements and reflections about them in this chapter.

As a reminder, my research question reads as follows:

- *How do domestic political shifts in Switzerland affect the operative strategies, narratives and practices of Swiss development cooperation NGOs active in the Global South?*

In this section, I present the political actors and elements as well as issues, pressures and shifts my interviewees touched on. Firstly, Parliament plays the most central role: its decision-making power as an entity, the shifting attitudes of its constituting individual MPs, and the manner of debates are all of concern to my interviewees. These topics are outlined from the perspectives of my interviewees in section 6.1.1. Secondly, the modalities and issues with NGOs' relations to SDC are explained in section 6.2. Finally, I describe more general (inter)national political trends and developments that influence NGO relations in section 6.3.

6.1 Parliamentary dynamics and debates

Parliamentary discussions and decisions on budget allocations play a large role for development NGOs. Most interviewees mentioned Parliament as the most important entity in the domestic political landscape. Some also mention public opinion, while Christian adds “the legislative aspect of our political system” (IP4 Pos. 44) alongside Parliament. Part of the state budget allocated to SDC ends up flowing to Swiss development NGOs through earmarked and core contributions. All interviewees' NGOs seemingly relied considerably on these funds.

The following subchapters detail which political shifts influence parliamentary debates and how and why they do so.

6.1.1 Parliament's polarisation and rightward drift

Opinions and argumentations of MPs from opposing parties in debates have become increasingly polarised. Roger summarises that “increasing polarisation in parliamentary politics” makes it “harder to strike a compromise nowadays” because they are “no longer ready to engage” with the other side (IP3 Pos 54). As much as the “Conservative Party” (presumably meaning SVP) “is more moving to the right and even the Centre Party is a bit moving to the right”, the “Social Democrats (and) Green parties have been moving to the left, in many respects” (IP3 Pos 54). Maria agrees “there's more of a big divide between the different poles” (IP8 Pos 62).

The increasing conservative majority in Parliament and FDP's and The Centre's supposed radicalisation causes concerns as well. Despite stating left- and right-wing parties have mainly remained true to their political positions, Thomas claims the 'The Centre' and FDP have shifted rightward. He remembers how "between 2003 and 2008, all the NGOs pushed to increase the Swiss ODA budget" (IP2 Pos 97) and that "back then, [The Centre was] in favour of that" (IP2 Pos 97). Today "you have less and less voices in these two parties that are usually the tip in the balance" for favourable decisions for development NGOs (IP2 Pos 97).

Similarly, Manuela sees development cooperation expenditure dependent on 'The Centre' MPs, as their voting patterns sway between the agendas of the political right and left (IP1 118). Furthermore, she singles out the FDP as having become "much more radical than they used to be 10 years ago", becoming "very, very conservative, very, very radical" and "implementing policies that increase (inequality)" (IP1 Pos 122). She names its "new" party president Thierry Burkart and party general secretary Jonas Projer as pushing the party's conservative shift (IP1 Pos 130 & 134). Illustratively, Roger also mentions Mr Burkart as a polarising force in Parliament who apparently said in an interview last year that "other EU countries are cutting much more, we could decrease the [ODA] budget even more [as well]" (IP3 Pos 87). These party-internal shifts have contributed significantly to polarising narratives and rhetoric within parliamentary debates⁷.

Moreover, there seems to have been a "political shift" of the "whole Parliament more to the right than it used to be" as well (IP6 Pos. 146). This shift seems mainly to have come about through the centre-right or right-leaning parties 'The Centre' and FDP radicalising to regain political influence lost in the past to SVP.

⁷ Interestingly, the right-wing populist party SVP, despite having the largest delegation in Parliament, was not often mentioned, possibly because many implicitly share Roger's view that "SVP was always against (international cooperation)" (IP3 Pos 66). This would make sense, given their party rhetoric has always been outspoken against foreign issues and has not radicalised much. By contrast, FDP seems to have shifted to the right, thereby catching the attention of my interviewees more.

6.1.2 Global geopolitical trends: The ‘Trump effect’

Naturally, the Swiss Parliament is not isolated from international geopolitical trends and events and is therefore influenced by them. Recent occurrences, such as US President Donald Trump’s controversial decision to factually dissolve USAID, the world’s largest aid donor (DeSilver, 2025), were mentioned numerous times. Other general trends included the rising support for military investment due to ongoing conflicts such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and in Palestine as well as nationalistic ‘us first’ movements all over the globe. These movements influence parliamentary debates in Switzerland, making some delegates say things that even two years ago they would not have dared to say (IP3 Pos. 87, IP8 Pos. 61).

An ominous figure in many interviews is US President Trump. Roger is sure:

“The Trump effect is clearly there. The rather conservative right-wing party think ‘okay, Trump can dissolve the whole international cooperation of the US, we can do the same, it’s anyway, as Trump says, it’s a waste of money, it’s all corrupt and then, so we should do the same, we should follow this example’. And this does, even though they don’t have a majority in Swiss politics so far, at least not in this kind of extreme version, it has an influence on how things are being debated in Switzerland.” (IP3 Pos 87)

However, the Swiss Parliament decided to cut their annual budget for international cooperation before Trump dissolved USAID (IP3 Pos 78), even before he got elected (IP1 Pos 373; see also Pichon & Mácsai, 2025; The Federal Council, 2025). Nevertheless, Trump’s global geopolitical reach has strongly affected Swiss parliamentary discussions, and thereby also decisions such as ODA budget reductions. Roger highlighted an interview from Council of States MP and FDP president Thierry Burkart and his implicit argumentation that if “Trump can dissolve the whole international cooperation of the US, we can do the same, it’s anyway, as Trump says, it’s a waste of money, it’s all corrupt”, suggesting that Switzerland should “follow this example” (IP3 Pos 87).

To Manuela’s mind, the “‘macho’ political culture” Trump fosters has given a “platform” for the Swiss Parliament and “everyone else to justify budget cuts”. His actions have played a “through ball” for other like-minded European right-wing political actors who have exerted pressure in their countries to reduce budgets: “if he does it, everybody else starts doing it” (IP1 Pos 373).

Thomas took notice of ODA funding streams being cut in the Netherlands and Sweden, too, and said that Switzerland “is behind the trend”, but...

...the pressure, when the same forces that I mentioned, who are critical of international cooperation, when they realise ‘aah, these other countries have done the cuts,’ (they say) ‘we should also do them here.’ So, usually Switzerland copies the trends on the political level, but not so quick.” (IP2 Pos 111)

6.1.3 National security concerns due to increasing geopolitical instability

International geopolitical pressures resulting from ongoing wars, such as the Russia-Ukraine and Middle Eastern conflicts has spread feelings of insecurity and fear among Swiss MPs. For Christian, together with the ‘Trump effect’, the perceived closeness of war is “like the perfect storm for IC” (IP4 Pos 46). Since “all” the 2024 parliamentary budget discussions were about “security, how to prepare for war” (IP6 Pos 41), international cooperation was deprioritised and denoted as “flexible” (IP6 Pos 41): it “has never been a priority when it comes to budget terms” anyway (IP4 Pos 39). Roger sums up:

“The overall trend is very clear: decrease international cooperation and other political areas, in order to boost defence industries. And Switzerland is just following the same trend.” (IP3 Pos 86)

Ursula asserts that Switzerland has become more “playable” by the political state of affairs in Europe than by Trump (IP5 Pos 198): until just a few years ago, these conflicts were “unimaginable” and “suddenly it is justified that we increase arming ourselves” (IP5 Pos 198). Considering the potential threat these conflicts pose to national security, it is “so easy” for MPs to say that we need more military budget, incidentally sidelining international cooperation (IP5 Pos 202).

6.1.4 Debt brake: hindering state expenditure on international cooperation?

The debt brake heavily influences parliamentary debates around state budget planning and approval. A constitutionally enshrined fiscal rule, it aims to balance federal expenditures and revenue in order to avoid an unsustainable indebtment rate (see section 3.5.3.). My interviewees were very critical of it. For Roger, it is an excuse that “the majority in the Parliament” use when advocating to “get rid of all the spendings they don't like, like international cooperation, social security, asylum seekers in Switzerland, climate adaptation [and] mitigation” (IP3 Pos 96).

“They say ‘look, we just don't have the money and now we need to invest in the Swiss army. We have the debt brake, so we need to cut somewhere, and this is where we... we’re very sorry but we have to do it’” (IP3 Pos 96)

Roger claims that even economists agree that it “is far too rigid” and that Switzerland “could easily have more governmental debt” (IP3 Pos 96). This would free up funds and delegitimise arguments for cutting ODA budgets, yet many still religiously adhere to the concept without even considering reforming its concrete mechanisms, leaving Roger annoyed that “the Parliament just doesn’t want to talk about these things” (IP3 Pos 109). He assumes Karin Keller-Suter (member of Federal Council, Head of the Federal Department of Finance FDF) does not help by repeating “over and over again: “Die Schweiz hat ein Ausgabenproblem, keine Einnahmeprobleme” (Switzerland has an expenditure problem, not income problems) (IP3 Pos 109).

“So we just talk about cutting, cutting, cutting, but not about generating new income, where it would even make sense” (IP3 Pos 109)

Hans also mentions Karin Keller-Suter’s role in promoting strict adherence to the debt brake in Parliament (IP6 Pos 161). Analytics of government budgets of the “last years” have shown that “our debt isn’t growing anymore, it has been decreasing a lot”, so it seems to be “a political decision” that “we don’t want to spend more on development cooperation, even though we could increase our debt level!” (IP6 Pos 160).

Maria expressed similar views: “most politicians feel that we have to have these austerity measures” (IP8 Pos 74). MPs use the debt brake to point out “there is no alternative, we have to cut somewhere” when discussions about increased military funding are taking place (IP8 Pos 74). At the same time, they undermine development cooperation efforts with statements like: “that’s just going to the foreign countries, it doesn’t do anything anyway, so let’s cut there” (IP8 Pos 74).

“It’s portrayed as something that has absolutely no alternative. And so a lot of people can say ‘oh yeah, I’m actually pro-development cooperation, it’s really important, but we have to (cut), we just don’t have the money. I mean, just look at our finances, so, really sorry, you know, my heart aches, but we have to cut the budget.’” (IP8 Pos 91)

6.1.5 Power of state administration in policymaking

Additionally, Roger warns more broadly not to “underestimate the importance and the power of the public administration” (IP3 Pos 48). Pointing to the fact that the Federal Council has increasingly used decrees to bypass parliamentary consultations, he says that...

“...the federal administration, the ministries and departments have a lot of power. How they shape certain things, when they give things into consultations, what kinds of experts they invite to prepare a draft, and so on. They have a huge influence, and you really need to be aware that many decisions are already pre-shaped in the public administration before they enter parliamentary debate”. (IP3 Pos 48)

6.2 Relations to SDC

In the following sections, I outline issues in the NGOs’ relationships with SDC.

6.2.1 NGOs financial accountability requirements

Swiss development NGOs must adhere to strict financial accountability and reporting requirements for funds from SDC, but also from other donors. This was a central issue touched on by most interviewees. These requirements are verifiably much higher than for subsidies granted by other Swiss government departments in other policy domains: Manuela refers to a Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) report which found “reporting and quality requirements of SDC money” are “5 times higher” than in other departments and ministries (IP1 Pos 169). She links this discrepancy to the “money staying in Switzerland” in other non-FDFA departments as well as a lack of familiarity with the complex contexts that SDC funds are dedicated for (IP1 Pos 165).

“(There is) certainly a much stronger focus today on results measurement than in the past. Today, politicians really want to know if we invest one Swiss Franc, what's the outcome, what does it bring? What's the impact in the Global South and what does it bring to us? So today, we see a much stronger focus of donor agencies like SDC on quantitative measurement, so we need to, on each and every SDC project we have, we need to report like loads of figures and facts” (IP3 Pos. 118)

This demand for visible, quantitative results comes from a general shift in SDC policies focusing more on “quick wins, quick changes” (IP6 Pos 239, which “might be to do with issues of the time

now, where everything on the phone or on Instagram, it's just always instant" (IP6 Pos 244). Reporting on "constant improvement [and] changes" (IP6 Pos 244), however minimal, is easier to grasp and looks more impactful than descriptions of livelihoods or other social indicators. But, Hans noted, bringing about sustainable social change "needs time" (IP6 Pos 245).

The perceived unfairness of these requirements becomes clear in Ursula's statement about responsibility of other departments: while the defence department can request and spend exorbitant sums of money on arms and "new jets", and the Swiss Farmers' Union unwaveringly receives the same budgetary allocations, "everybody looks at" the substantially smaller SDC budget "with an eagle eye" (IP5 Pos 32)⁸. This creates massive pressure on her NGO to comply with all these financial regulations.

This sentiment is shared by Monika, who says:

"What I find sometimes a bit not aligned is the different measurements that are done in different sectors. So, we have to show for everything how much it is benefitting, and other kind of areas do not have to show any impact or evaluation for... it's simply a given that it's good what they do and it will bring what they say..." (IP9 Pos. 79)

Adhering to these strict rules requires high operational costs and meticulous quality of work, as not complying with the requirements carries severe reputational risks (IP5 Pos 32). Such risks became reality for one of my interviewees⁹, whose NGO and management executives were singled out by media outlets and right-wing politicians for an accounting mishap.

6.2.2 Decreasing consideration of consultation process of ICS

The ICS is a government strategy paper that aims to align institutional and other Swiss international cooperation efforts. Hans outlines the process of the enactment of the strategy (see section 3.2). SDC holds the lead responsibility in managing the consultation process that preludes the parliamentary enactment of the strategy. For many other government budget matters, i.e. those

⁸ Compare with findings in section 7.2.2, 7.3.1 and 7.4.2.

⁹ Due to potentially identifying information, the name of the interviewee has been omitted in this instance in order to prevent the identification of the individual.

of the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), such a consultation process is mandatory, while it is not for ICS. For Hans, this points to a comparatively weaker institutionalised role of non-governmental actors in shaping international cooperation policy compared to other policy areas (IP6 Pos. 96).

During said consultation process, “hundreds” of these civil society, private sector, institutional and individual actors express their stances regarding what “can and should be improved within the ‘dispatch’” in “elaborate positioning papers” (IP6 Pos. 100; see also FDFA (2025: 12)). Ideally, the ‘dispatch’ should reflect “what the development cooperation sector defines [as] ‘that's what we need’” (IP6 Pos 76). Until recently, the dispatch’s parliamentary approval seemed a given; its budgetary requests were “perceived as [already] approved” (IP6 Pos 72). However, recent parliamentary decisions to reduce the proposed budget have “radically changed” this expectation: rather than representing a foregone conclusion, the ‘dispatch’ now marks “the maximum we can get”. Hans now expects cut to be made, “that’s new” (IP6 Pos 72). This shift limits the political agency of NGOs seeking to influence strategic priorities through the consultation process.

Additionally, within the consultation process of the ICS, Hans notes a considerable procedural flaw. He emphasised that after the most recent iteration, although “a lot of work [was] put into that from the civil society, in order to collaborate, to improve, to have our say within the ‘dispatch’”, the response from SDC was “thank you, but we don't take anything into consideration” (IP6 Pos 100). This points to an increasing depoliticization of NGOs within the ICS approval process.

6.2.3 Restriction of SDC funding for sensitisation work in Switzerland

In 2021, in response to political pressures from Parliament’s conservative majority, SDC changed its guiding principles for collaboration with Swiss NGOs (SDC, 2023). The pressure had formed due to a publicised case of unlawful use of government funds by a Swiss development NGO for political campaigning purposes (DeSilver, 2025). Funding granted to Swiss development NGOs thus became forbidden to be used for sensitisation and awareness-raising purposes in the Swiss public. “15 years ago, the Swiss government actually funded the work to really go out there and look”, including investigative activities on labour conditions in global value chains (IP2 Pos 93).

Since the ban, informing the Swiss public about problematic links between Swiss actors and global inequalities has become harder for NGOs (IP2 Pos 93).

Hans links these changes to political concerns about institutional funding for civil society actors and NGOs whose political reach might grow and who might “criticise the government” (IP6 Pos. 227). By weakening NGOs’ capabilities to spread public understanding of and support for international cooperation, these regulations restrict NGOs’ political agency. For Thomas, this clearly demonstrated the power of the “many voices” in Parliament that say “NGOs should not interfere with, or we [as NGOs] don’t have a mandate to interfere with politics, so we should keep quiet” (IP2 Pos 93). The restriction therefore not only constrains NGOs’ public communication strategies but also more generally weakens their legitimacy as actors in Swiss domestic political spheres.

6.2.4 SDC at mercy of parliamentary decisions

NGO state budget allocations depend on SDC’s state budget allocation, which itself depends on parliamentary decisions, so it is not SDC alone that decides how their funding contributions to NGOs are to be used. SDC may implement strategic reorientations not because they deem it as beneficial to Swiss development cooperation efforts but because they feel pressured to do so. Parliament’s attitudes “push the administration” in specific ways, putting “big pressure” on state departments engaged in international cooperation (IP2 Pos 99). For example, as SDC ended its bilateral cooperation programmes in Bangladesh, Albania and Zambia in December 2024, Roger was left frustrated by SDC’s reasoning that “there is no need anymore” there, despite Bangladesh being “one of the countries with the biggest need[s]” and having the “biggest refugee camp in the world” (IP3 Pos 158; see also SDC & SECO (2024)). However, he realises that “in the end, it’s just a pragmatic decision” (IP3 Pos 166):

“They (SDC) have less money and they said ‘look, up to a certain degree of budget cuts, we can like have linear cuts, we just take a little out in each and every programme, but if the cuts become bigger, we need to close down programmes, so whole countries, we just pull out’. And that’s the case now. So we shouldn’t blame SDC for the decision to close those countries but rather blame

the Parliament for deciding to cut the budget. Yeah. We found the explanation they gave pretty weak, we couldn't follow their logic, but they just had to find some excuse.” (IP3 Pos 166)

Therefore, budget decisions in Parliament are the actual cause of SDC's strategic adjustments. Hans also recognises that Parliament's ODA budget reductions “influences directly the spending of SDC and the money that flows to the NGOs” (IP6 Pos 51). Consequently, SDC works out solutions and mechanisms to maintain Swiss international cooperation efforts as effectively and as aligned with the ICS as possible.

“They (SDC) decide, are we going to continue to maintain our own staff? That's a big budget cost. Are we going to support multilateral development cooperation? To all the UN organisations... Are we going to be investing in our own bilateral programs in the South and/or are we going to support NGOs?” (IP6 Pos 60)

6.2.5 Increasing involvement of FDFA in SDC affairs

Furthermore, another “shift in the last 20 years” has been the overarching FDFA's increasing influence on SDC's affairs (IP6 Pos 171). Within the federal administrative structure, SDC is subordinated to the FDFA, which includes other agencies such as SECO and the Peace and Human Rights Division (PHRD).

Hans claims that SDC used to be “much more detached” from, despite always being organisationally part of, the FDFA, whereas now it is really “used as an arm of the FDFA” (IP6 Pos 170). This apparently stems from a “decision by Parliament” that SDC should pursue other, more general foreign policy goals on topics such as migration more actively (IP6 Pos 170). The foreign minister, as head of the FDFA, is Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis, and he “has a very strong reign” on SDC representatives, dictating “what they're allowed to say [and what not]” in parliamentary budget debates. Recently, Maria said, Mr Cassis went one step further and forbade them to speak in these debates at all, which was felt in the budget debates for 2025 (IP8 Pos 138). This seems to indicate that previously SDC representatives were allowed to speak with MPs about their allocated budget (see chapter 3.4). Yet Maria claims SDC representatives are “not allowed to go and lobby in

Parliament” (IP8 Pos 133) for their own budget anymore, they are “only allowed to come on request” (IP8 Pos 137)¹⁰.

Furthermore, Mr Cassis is “extremely engaged in even small details of their work” and he “exercises his influence over the department a lot more than other previous federal councillors maybe have, or in a more negative way for development cooperation” (IP8 Pos 142). Maria alleges that this stems from his “personal vested interest” in “the whole private sector shift” (IP8 Pos 142). Despite being the overarching head of SDC, she is convinced his principal motivation is not to act in the FDFA’s (and even less in the SDC’s) best interests, but to further his own political agenda.

6.3 Trends and shifts in the Swiss public

In this section, I discuss general trends and shifts of public political opinions and whether Parliament represents the Swiss public fairly.

6.3.1 Public movement to the political right

A prominent shift of the Swiss public political environment has been its broad rightward shift over the past 20 to 30 years. This is reflected mainly in electoral results strengthening the conservative PPR party SVP and voting outcomes of federal initiatives. This affects not just Parliament, as explained in chapter 1.1.1.1, but also wider societal attitude changes regarding solidarity, redistribution of wealth and international engagement. These attitude and moral compass shifts in turn affect Swiss development NGOs because they rely on public support through donations as well as through moral solidarity with the NGOs’ missions.

My interviewees took note of this public movement to the right. Maria states “recently we’ve seen a big push to the right” (IP8 Pos 61) and that there has been “general movement towards local

¹⁰ Maria (IP8 Pos 133) says that SDC now relies on one specific NGO to do parliamentary budget lobbying for them. Apparently, this NGO’s representatives help SDC by arguing for the necessity of their budget, but also criticise them in other aspects, leading to an interesting, seemingly contradictory relationship dynamic.

interests and more conservative, nationalist thinking” (IP8 Pos 56). Thomas believes that “identity politics in the last 10 years haven’t helped” to combat this movement, and “the right-wing national conservative agenda [that] tries to tell people, you need to fix your thing within your country first” finds many receptive ears (IP2 Pos 81).

The SVP and their discursive framings of issues are closely linked to this trend. Hans surmises that “Swiss people feel more safe voting for SVP, [or just generally a] more right-wing parliament than a left-wing one”, potentially explaining the party’s success and dissemination of their ideas (IP6 Pos 147). The dynamic between public attitudes and Parliament reinforces this:

“Discussions (in public settings) about Swiss values, our national values and having secure employment and working conditions in Switzerland, or seeing ourselves as an island of peace and prosperity within Europe and we don't depend on anybody from the outside, more like right-wing thinking, that influences a lot all the discussions between the Parliament!” (IP6 Pos 147)

The growing conservative political movement in Switzerland also benefits from other political “aspects” gaining more relevance, making public opinion move “away from international solidarity” (IP4 Pos 46). However, the next section shows why, despite recognising a public rightward shift, my interviewees see a more differentiated relationship between public opinion and parliamentary dynamics regarding development cooperation.

6.3.2 Public opinions and parliamentary decisions: aligned or diverging?

Two main ideas about the relationship between public opinion and Parliament regarding development cooperation emerged from the conversations with my interviewees. Firstly, that public opinion and Parliament are an adequate representation of each other; secondly and predominantly, that there is a chasm between the two and that public opinion does not influence parliamentary proceedings as much as it should.

Representing the first line of thought, Monika says that “Parliament is a very good reflection of the public opinion”, which she sees as the most important political element for development NGOs (IP9 Pos 70). Sandra agrees that Parliament is “a mirror of the public atmosphere in Switzerland”, but “also of global geopolitics” (IP7 Pos 84). Hans’ take is that Parliament “definitely represents

electors' values, all the parliamentarians are elected by cantons, by the people, so it is somehow also how Swiss people feel today" (IP6 Pos 147), so public opinion "influences a lot all the discussions between the Parliament" (IP6 Pos 147).

However, my interviewees often conveyed that the Swiss public's support for development cooperation is disproportionately larger than that of MPs. Hans also mentioned how "perceptions of the public regarding development cooperation" are not "necessarily" congruent with those of Parliament (IP6 Pos 147). Like Thomas, Maria and Manuela, he references surveys conducted by the NADEL department of ETH Zurich. This annual representative study aims to gauge public opinion, and the most recent one (Patel et al., 2024) concluded that in 2024, 86% of the Swiss population supported an increase or a continuation at the same level of state expenditure on international cooperation. Yet, at the end of the same year, Parliament decided to reduce this budget for the following year by 110 million francs (see chapter 3.4.3).

Maria notices that most of the population "is not really aware how Parliament works", therefore allowing Parliament and the federal council to increasingly sideline international cooperation without public outrage (IP8 Pos 56). Manuela expresses concerns that...

"...the results of the survey and the public opinion of Switzerland have nothing to do with the decisions of the Parliament. Yeah, so you don't see any correlation of the public opinion versus the decision of the Parliament, so they (the public) wanted to decrease military spending, they wanted to increase health, education, and development cooperation, and if you see the decisions (of the parliament) now, it's exactly the opposite." (IP1 Pos 109)

6.3.3 NGO – private sector partnerships

Economic, market-oriented logics have also become increasingly engrained in the Swiss development NGO sector (see section 2.3.1). The growing role of companies and their profit-oriented approaches in project planning, implementation and evaluation is described by Roger as the "corporatisation of aid" (IP3 Pos 120). SDC and especially SECO actively promote these Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), for example by incentivising NGOs to collaborate with corporations involved in raw material imports from Global South countries (IP5 Pos 110). This trend links to diminishing state budget allocations for international cooperation: by strengthening market actors

role in development cooperation as mobilisers of private capital for public Global South interests, states can afford to dial back their expenditure, which pleases conservative and free-market-advocating political actors (see section 2.3.1)

Despite the political promotion of PPPs having already been a “trend over the last maybe 10 years”, it has “really increased now again” (IP8 Pos 96). Current foreign minister Ignazio Cassis advocates strongly for these crossover enterprises because of his liberal political convictions:

“He is very keen on engaging with big private companies and bringing them into the game and saying “ah, now the private sector will solve all the problems because they know how to do business, how to make profit, so let's do away with the traditional way of development cooperation and let the private sector solve it.” (IP3 Pos 120)

Cassis’ leadership of the FDFA also enabled Switzerland’s wider policy shift to align Swiss international cooperation more strongly with its national economic interests. Maria asserts that these economic considerations increasingly drive development cooperation funding priorities rather than goals such as livelihood improvement or poverty reduction, and PPP advocates reinforce this trend (IP8 Pos 101). This undermining of the main mission of development cooperation, “to reduce poverty, serve the poorest people, it's an act of solidarity” (IP8 Pos 101), is concerning to Maria:

“...it's becoming more popular, and more mainstream, to say ‘no, actually, the main beneficiaries should be us, so we should invest in our private sector, it's okay to subsidise our private companies to go and invest in some countries, because it should have a benefit for us.’” (IP8 Pos 101)

This tendency of focusing on gaining domestic economic rewards from development cooperation reflects a broader reorientation towards conditional approaches (IP5 Pos 111; see also sections 2.3.1 & 3.3).

On top of that, Maria observes how the Swiss private sector profits from support from powerful international entities such as the World Bank, who increasingly want to bring economic progress and development directly to the Global South through investment vehicles such as “blended finance instruments” (IP8 Pos 96). Supposedly, this will prompt the “private sector [to] just flock to these countries and invest there and create a better world for everybody and the poverty will be

gone” (IP8 Pos 96). Bewilderingly to Maria, despite past attempts of such neoliberal development approaches having failed miserably, the World Bank sticks by these policies:

“The actual investments (from blended finance instruments) in the poorest countries are miniscule. There's just no business case in investing in like the poorest areas. So we've always been saying that this kind of stuff, it just doesn't reach the poorest people, it doesn't reach the poorest countries, and it's just shifting money to the private sector instead of the public sector.”
(IP8 Pos 101)

6.3.4 Securitisation – development nexus: discourses and impacts for NGOs

The term ‘securitisation’ is used in various ways regarding development cooperation. In the following sections, I outline how I designate between three ways of interpretation and my interviewees views on it.

6.3.4.1 Geopolitical crises and wars: Development cooperation deprioritised

National security and defence considerations in political decision-making have increased massively in Switzerland, particularly since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with implications for development NGOs. Roger observes that “most European countries are decreasing the budget for international cooperation in order to shift the funds toward defence industries” (IP3 Pos. 78), a trend Thomas says “strongly influences” Switzerland as well (IP2 Pos. 113).

“War has moved so close that people are afraid and people think ‘yes, it's legitimate to spend more money’ (on national defence).” (IP2 Pos 125)

As Maria notes, “the whole militarisation debate, the war in Ukraine, has caused a big push” towards understanding national security “very narrowly, [as] just military strengths”, excluding other aspects such as climate policy, social protection or international cooperation (IP8 Pos 62). As such, defence spending in Switzerland has been prioritised “at the expense of international cooperation” despite its contributions to domestic national security as well (IP8 Pos 62).

Sandra describes how the proximity of war triggered a broader discursive shift in Switzerland in which “human security [of people in the Global South] is deprioritised, but instead state security is prioritised”, facilitating the marginalisation of development cooperation in debates of domestic

national security (IP7 Pos 97). According to her, the ODA budget cuts alongside financial supplementation of the Swiss army have exposed this dynamic (IP7 Pos 97).

Monika elaborates on these points, highlighting that as soon as there was “a need for more arms”, the reaction was “we cut half of the development cooperation (budget), because it (supposedly) has no influence on each other” (IP9 Pos 55). Yet...

“...if you look at the security architecture as a whole, it is clear that also the global cooperation is playing an important role because it is part of contributing to the stability worldwide. And when you can prevent crises, you have better stability, you have also less propensity for conflicts, for crises, for huge movements of people, within countries but also over borders, and this kind of understanding has been lost.” (IP9 Pos 55)

She says one reason for this may be the general international movement towards prioritising “local interests” and “more conservative, nationalist thinking” which narrows common conceptualisations of security (IP9 Pos 56 & 61).

Therefore, geopolitical proximity to armed conflict seems to make increased military expenditure and smaller ODA budgets more socially acceptable.

6.3.4.2 Improving ‘fragile Global South’ contexts: Development cooperation as a stabilising force

Interestingly, with their statements in the above chapter, the interviewees demonstrate how they align with the idea that development cooperation can and should serve goals of stabilising fragile local contexts. They specifically call for efforts such as investing in preventive approaches to support “young people in fragile contexts which ensures safety and security” (IP2 Pos 126) to be considered by domestic policymakers as part of national security strategies. This aligns with the development-security nexus as it is incorporated in the ICS and other Swiss institutional strategic frameworks (see section 3.5.5).

However, much scholarly critique abounds of this perspective of seeing development cooperation as stabilising fragile local contexts that serves donor nations’ security concerns (see section 2.2.3). Yet my interviewees do not seem to have any contentions with this view.

6.3.4.3 Stopping migration: Instrumentalising development cooperation

The expectation that development cooperation should contribute to restrictive migration objectives is increasingly voiced in public spheres in Switzerland. Roger maintains that in “more conservative circles in Switzerland”, narratives of “using international cooperation to stop migration” are common (IP3 Pos 117). Aversion towards migration from public stakeholders has led it being integrated into SDC policies: Hans notes the SDC’s focus on Sub-Saharan Africa is not just “because the region is poor and needs more help”, but in fact because “that’s where the migrants come from!” (IP6 Pos 170)¹¹.

Maria points to repeated political attempts to more explicitly link development cooperation or aid provisions to migration-related objectives. These have included demands to “stop all development cooperation in countries that don't take back their refugees” or in other ways “make this very strong link” (IP8 Pos 91). The political persistence on these conditional aid provisions illustrates how the development cooperation sector is politically pressured to serve anti-migration policies.

6.3.5 Role of media

The media landscape plays an important role in the Swiss political arena, shaping public perceptions of development cooperation and thus NGOs’ operational space. As Maria notes, “the media doesn’t really talk much about [development cooperation] at all... or only very negatively” (IP8 Pos 66-70). Manuela similarly observes that NGOs “only get negative press, you don’t get positive press”, citing reproachful coverage on management salaries of a specific Swiss development NGO. Along with Roger, she also alleges the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) newspaper publishes “fake news” about development cooperation (IP1 Pos 314; IP3 Pos 128). Thomas equally criticises NZZ’s coverage: their journalists question the “entire impact” of development cooperation work,

¹¹ The previous (2021 – 2024) and the current (2025 – 2028) Swiss ICS both include migration as a “transversal topic, thus responding to Parliament’s calls to establish strategic links” between international cooperation efforts and conservative domestic immigration-inhibiting interests (see FDFA, 2020, 2025: 16).

claiming that it “is only supporting dictators and fuelling even more corruption” or questioning “why is Africa still poor if we financed so much money?” (IP2 Pos 150).

“20 years ago, you were like a hero to be in this work. And today, people [are like] ‘huuh, what, Africa, what do you do there and does this even help at all?’ People are putting it into question, it’s not only a bad thing, but it means people are maybe a bit less motivated, because people on the street or in the newspaper, they read negative articles...” (IP2 Pos. 152)

Additionally, Hans also mentions how “individual journalists [and] newspapers” use “right-wing” rhetoric to “attack the whole development cooperation sector” and undermine it by picking out singular projects that did not “work as intended” (IP6 Pos 214). He likes to remind them that Swiss engagement with development cooperation in the Global South is a constitutional obligation (IP6 Pos 213), something more impartial and well-researched coverage might consider.

Increasing media polarisation and shifts in editorial positioning are blamed for these trends. While outlets such as ‘Tages-Anzeiger’ are perceived as “a bit pro civil society,” NZZ is perceived to be “very anti-NGO, anti-civil society” and anti-development cooperation (IP1 Pos 318; IP3 Pos 133). To Roger, they are “a part of this whole polarisation, so they’re moving to the right”, publishing “repeatedly very critical articles about international cooperation”, about civil society, about his NGO being “too leftish” and about how international cooperation “is a waste of money” (IP3 Pos 133).

Roger also links the negative coverage to a decline in quality of media (IP1 Pos 129). Due to reduced capacities for “investigating background stories”, accurate explanatory coverage of complex global issues from media outlets has become rare (IP3 Pos 129). Broader structural transformations in the private media sector such as consolidation and government-aligned ownership structures have led to this phenomenon, with independent outlets that produce quality journalism struggling to survive (IP8 Pos 128).

Sandra emphasises that media narratives increasingly intersect with wider political polarisation and “anti-wokeness” discourses that have become “completely legitimate nowadays” (IP7 Pos 75). She makes this out to be the reason her NGO receives more enquiries about their financial reports

than previously (IP7 Pos 75). Overall, these developments contribute to a more simplified, “fear-based” and polarising public debate about development cooperation (IP7 Pos 202).

6.3.6 Swiss values: a resilient political backbone?

Switzerland’s political reputation on the world stage is shaped by its history of promoting democratic values, acting as a mediating party in conflicts and its adherence to the principle of neutrality. Parliamentary debates as well as political discussions in other settings in Switzerland are influenced to a certain degree by these values, for example the Swiss “tradition of humanitarian cooperation” (IP2 Pos 112). A symbolically important pillar of Swiss engagement in the Global South, “it has always been the case that all parties agree that [humanitarian aid] is an important thing, that we should do that” (IP8 Pos 96). Thus, these values and principles play a role for development NGOs.

Moreover, ideals of bridging cultural gaps and reducing frictions between societal groups are important from a Swiss foreign policy perspective, says Christian, stemming from Switzerland’s multicultural national identity (IP4 Pos 74). However, he also warns these noble causes are of course not the sole reason for development cooperation engagements:

“The Swiss presence in a certain country had its form due to specific developments, reflections, specific reasons, already in the past, because Switzerland had its interests and were, already in the past, acting not only in a beneficiary manner, like, interest was never only (on) improving the perspectives of people in a certain country” (IP4 Pos 91)

Nevertheless, these renowned ‘typical Swiss’ values do run deep in Swiss foreign policymaking, something my interviewees acknowledge. These factors were probably mentioned by them to contrast the political shifts they are observing. Possibly, these traditional values of Switzerland as a nation on the international stage may be a stabilising or inhibiting factor to the many development cooperation-opposed political forces in domestic Swiss political settings.

7 Findings: Reactions and adaptations of development NGOs

Swiss development NGOs are embedded in domestic political contexts, despite their engagements in foreign localities. They operate according to certain strategic and practical principles. When political conditions and regulations change, NGOs inadvertently face altered scopes of action. To ensure their organisational survival along with the achievement of their goals, they react and adjust, adapt, discuss, alter, refine and/or negotiate things in a variety of ways.

In this chapter, I provide insights into how my interviewees framed their responses and adaptations. In the first section, I outline what novel internal discussions have come up and what considerations are now being made due to political shifts. The second section looks at discursive and narrative adjustments. Thirdly, I analyse more practical, concrete changes in operative structures of NGOs. Fourthly, I focus on long-term strategic changes resulting from occurred shifts made in anticipation of further change. Finally, the last section includes thoughts on potential future responses to current trends that may become necessary for NGOs.

7.1 Strategic considerations

In this section, I summarise insights gained regarding political topics that have been or are currently being considered and deliberated in strategic discussions in my interviewees' respective NGOs'.

7.1.1 Communicating better to public

A broad agreement exists between the interviewees that improved communication with wider public audiences in Switzerland is integral to Swiss development NGOs' survival, but it is not easy to achieve. Manuela laments that since the Swiss development cooperation sector has not managed to "speak [out] in one voice", there is not much of a public reaction when ODA budgets get cut (IP1 Pos 310). To change this, she sees being "more present with the Swiss public" as "one of the big challenges we have to [overcome]" (IP1 Pos 310).

“We need to basically also do our homework to reconnect with the Swiss people for sure.” (IP3 Pos 77)

While Thomas does not suggest changing his NGOs’ current public communication campaigns where they “point to exploitation in countries that produce things which in the end land in Switzerland” (IP3 Pos 91), to Manuela’s NGO, figuring out how to be more “present and visual” in public domains is central. For this, she cannot rely on Swiss media outlets (IP1 Pos 314, see section 6.3.5). Having a “common voice of Swiss civil society in development cooperation” would help, though she does not mention any ongoing efforts for this (IP1 Pos 314).

One promising avenue to increase public presence to her is social media: by using Instagram and TikTok, where people nowadays overwhelmingly “consume news”, they could get through to the “younger generation, who are a bit more open-minded, who have the sense of responsibility what Switzerland is like profiting from” (IP1 Pos 319). But “it takes so much resources to be present in social media”, so “we’d have to like increase our communication department” (IP1 Pos 319). “Being visual in the city” is also something worth investing in for Manuela, “but it’s very, very expensive” (IP1 Pos 348).

Improving public communication is also on Roger’s NGO’s agenda. He shares Manuela’s conviction that most people “get their information from Facebook and Instagram, they don’t read quality media anymore, like newspapers or SRG or whatnot” (IP3 Pos 129). However, his NGO concentrates on communicating better with public audiences through existing media outlets where “we try to have our stories told” and “not just talk about the problems, but also talk about solutions, what works and also positive stories” (IP3 Pos 129), but “it’s not so easy” to get the message across meaningfully (IP3 Pos 129).

A key challenge of transmitting complex systemic issues to the masses is that they are “not easy to relate to” (IP1 Pos 165). Roger recognises this difficulty, too:

“...how development cooperation works today, how projects are implemented, this is hugely complex because you try to work with the state actors, with the private sector, you try to change policy and things like that, it’s a long-term perspective, and this is very complicated to explain.” (IP3 Pos 196)

Balancing the mission of increasing public awareness about Roger's NGO's efforts with how they explain their work is a "quite challenging tension field" (IP3 Pos 196). Necessarily, "we convey a kind of very simplistic picture of what we do" to help people understand the issues, even though the way they work has changed a lot over the years (IP3 Pos 196). This leads to people then criticising "that we still do the same that we did 30 years ago, which is not the case" (IP3 Pos 196).

Relatedly, to combat common arguments used by right-wing politicians, communicating to the public more effectively which betterments have occurred in specific situations is key. Monika says "you have to explain that there is a better situation now than it was 30 years ago" (IP9 Pos 60). A conundrum arises here, though. Focusing on individual development cooperation cases when communicating to the masses garners more support because it incurs emotional affection: "if you tell the story about a family, you will get much more money, than if you systemically explain something" (IP9 Pos 60). Yet, speaking about systemic improvements and the positive impacts of development cooperation is also important "if you want to show relevance" for the entire sector, something it has been lacking but is imperative for its persistence (IP9 Pos 61). Thus, finding a balance here seems strategically vital to Monika.

7.1.2 Lobbying politicians better

The simplistic framing issues of development NGOs' complex engagements are also pertinent with politicians. Roger's quote above applies "to normal people or also the politicians" (IP3 Pos 196). He also references Monika's above point on politicians:

"Hard facts don't count so much in politics, you really need to like reach peoples' hearts if you want to change their minds and the figures, facts and figures won't convince them. I think that's pretty much the same everywhere." (IP3 Pos 43)

Through his experiences of interacting with Swiss MPs, Roger concludes "it's more difficult to reach out to those who are not already convinced, like the more conservative, right-wing parties, because they don't want to listen anymore" (IP3 Pos 154). This indicates that previously such dialogues took place, where Roger was at least able to attempt to convince politically opposing MPs of development cooperation's importance, but he is no longer able to even have such discussions. The political polarisation in Parliament and in politics in general is linked to this.

Similarly, Hans' NGO tries to influence politicians "when it comes to specific decisions, do some lobby work", and there is an MP on his NGO's board for this, but the impact is "quite small" (IP6 Pos 191).

7.1.3 Navigating private sector engagement/PPPs

The extent to which or whether development cooperation NGOs should engage with the private sector at all is a contentious issue. Maria disagrees with the SDC's approach of promoting such collaborations but acknowledges the "private sector thing is becoming bigger" (IP8 Pos 159) and that perspectives differ: "some [NGOs] see it as an opportunity, also for themselves, to engage in partnerships, others may be very critical about it" (IP8 Pos 159). There are clear such advocates among my interviewees. Replying to my question about whether she sees potential advantages resulting from PPPs, Ursula says:

"Yes, absolutely. I think there's no way around it, and I think it's extremely important. I think many NGOs are not quite there yet or not quite ready, and the private sector is not quite there yet either... I believe that if we work together better, it can really be a win-win situation for both sides. Everyone has their role to play, and both are needed." (IP5 Pos 110)

Some interviewees see these partnerships in a more balanced way, weighing up potential benefits more critically against potential drawbacks. For example, "the increased private sector engagement" has been "the biggest tension field" for a couple of years now for Roger and his NGO (IP3 Pos 194). For him, it is a "delicate" issue deciding "what kind of money should we accept and what not" (IP3 Pos 194), because it "comes down to values and personal beliefs" (IP3 Pos 197). They try to take "a bit more nuanced position" and acknowledge the importance of the private sector, "but only if you do it in the right way and if everybody plays along the same rules" (IP3 Pos 212).

Problems of communicating such nuances are felt when Roger's NGO plans a public statement on their support for causes like the corporate responsibility initiative (KoVI). Finding a way to transmit such a conditional message to a broad public audience in a polarised society proves to be hard, since they do not want to undermine partners of their current PPPs, but simultaneously want

to advocate for stricter corporate responsibility laws which are not really in the interests of these partners (IP3 Pos 216).

7.1.4 Localising and decolonising: important in an austere political environment

All Swiss development NGOs must consider decolonising their fields of work and strengthening and broadening local actors' agencies and scopes of action in their Global South projects. An associated challenge is the internal restructuring and strategic adjustment needed to achieve this. Questions such as "which role will we play in the future in this setting, what should we still do here in [place name of Swiss NGO headquarters]?" (IP4 Pos 30) are central to these discussions. In this regard, SDC demands NGOs to follow high standards and objectives (IP4 Pos 59; see SDC (2025c) for the Locally-Led Cooperation (LLC) approach).

Despite these strategic commitments to the localisation agenda of SDC, as well as many "Global South governments" and "civil society organisations" voicing discontent over previous such efforts, this has not "reached Parliament at all" (IP8 Pos 160). It has incurred debates within Maria's NGO and between her NGO and other development actors, which are important and which "we have to take very seriously" (IP8 Pos 167), because "there is still quite a bit to be done" (IP8 Pos 167). But the absence of the topic in Parliament gives the NGOs the breathing space and time they need to aptly adjust their strategies and operations to these ideas. Otherwise...

"...it would be just fodder or fuel for the [MPs] who are against development cooperation anyway, now they can say 'even the Global South doesn't want you anymore, you're just colonial leftovers' or whatever." (IP8 Pos. 166)

Such potential arguments of MPs are recognised by Thomas and he shares these concerns. However, he pushes back against radical advocates for localisation for two reasons. Firstly, it needs to be clarified which local actors are being empowered. Ending development cooperation involvement in Global South countries means leaving a power "vacuum" that can be filled by actors in a "disruptive and nasty" way who "will not really let their people participate" in the development of their country (IP2 Pos 170). Secondly, to avoid the first concern happening, before the "people

do not have political systems that allow them to engage [democratically], I think [Global North] engagement is actually still welcome and needed” (IP2 Pos 169).

“I just think the political reality, yeah, is not conducive for disengagement. It needs more engagement, and more funding and maybe actually less, you know, less dominance of the North, more voices in the Global South, something we've been saying for a long time.” (IP2 Pos 171)

Manuela’s NGO is part of an alliance that focuses on facilitating “more South-South exchange” of knowledge and resources (IP1 Pos 285). “That strengthens innovation” and allows for “certain [collaborative] dynamics” to evolve locally to bring about positive social changes (IA Pos 285). Manuela could therefore see the future role of her NGO in Switzerland being more about enabling Global South actors to “access funds” elsewhere rather than about channelling Swiss funds there. However, at the moment, “the [ODA] budget cuts affect us anyways” (IP1 Pos 289).

These reflections show how localisation and decolonisation are strategically deliberated in my interviewees’ NGOs in the absence of generous state budget allocations to secure new avenues of legitimacy as well as continued success of their ongoing Global South projects.

7.2 Discursive, narrative-related changes

In this section, I summarise examples of how Swiss development NGOs have adapted discursive and narrative elements and tactics in their engagements with domestic political actors.

7.2.1 Including development cooperation in ‘national security’ framings

The development-security nexus in Swiss politics has three dimensions: development as a deprioritised affair versus defence and military reinforcements, development as a tool for stopping migration flows and development as a force stabilising fragile local contexts. My interviewees’ explanations of the situation regarding these themes are laid out in the previous section 6.3.4. Here, I explain more strategic deliberations that were mentioned regarding these securitisation links being drawn to development cooperation.

7.2.1.1 Reprioritising development cooperation in the face of geopolitical crises and wars

The national securitisation discourse in militaristic terms has become increasingly prevalent in political circles since the Ukraine-Russia conflict began in 2022 (see section 6.3.4.1). Monika

mentions that “last year in the Parliament, the reaction when there was a need of more arms, more money for the army, was ‘okay, we cut half of the development cooperation, because it has no influence on each other’” (IP9 Pos 55). To her, this demonstrates a dire ignorance of development cooperation efforts that play a role in global stability and conflict prevention. Making this systemic link clearer to donors and the public has therefore been high on Monika’s NGO’s agenda in recent times.

Similarly, Thomas also argues in favour of reframing national security beyond militarisation. However, he sees “the majority in Parliament or [people] in the media or in public” needing a lot of convincing to believe in development cooperation’s contribution to ensuring the national security of Switzerland. Also, because no Swiss development cooperation project can fully guarantee success or political stabilisation, NGOs could never claim that they “directly bring peace” to fragile contexts (IP2 Pos 136). Nevertheless, communicating these nuanced issues are a talking point in Thomas’ NGO.

Thomas and Monika are both convinced that investing in these efforts has its benefits for the overarching global “security architecture” (IP9 Pos 55), but by promoting development cooperation as increasing economic opportunities to combat global security and migration concerns, there is a danger of feeding into right-wing anti-migration narratives (IP3 Pos 135-136). Thus, to avoid this, NGOs consider this dynamic carefully in NGO communication strategies.

7.2.1.2 (Not) stopping migration? Resisting development cooperation’s instrumentalization

Debates around whether development cooperation should contribute to reducing migration towards Europe have been “a recurring topic over the last 15 years” (IP3 Pos 117), splitting many opinions. Reducing migration flows is often viewed as keeping out potential national security risks (see section 3.5.4).

While Roger’s NGO has increasingly implemented migration-related projects, it remains cautious about being associated with efforts aimed at limiting migration, because it is just what “more conservative circles” would like them to do (IP3 Pos 117). This also bears reputational risks, as these projects could be unfavourably framed by these conservative circles if they became more

public, which would reflect negatively on the NGO. Roger does not see it as the role of development cooperation to prevent people from moving, but since “there is more money flowing into these programs”, they continue to be implemented (IP2 Pos 143). Hence, juggling this moral stance while being involved in these projects that are funded for reasons diverging from his own and that also pose reputational risks remains challenging for him.

Although Maria’s NGO has “always fought very strongly against that” (IP8 Pos 91), the political persistence on the development – anti-migration link shows NGOs must continuously navigate this instrumentalization. For Maria, it is very clear that aid conditionalities should not be included in Swiss development project agreements (see section 6.3.4.3).

On the other hand, framing this dynamic more favourably, Monika thinks that this migration-reducing effect can indeed be achieved through development cooperation and that realising this helps the sector argue for its validity in an increasingly polarised society (IP8 Pos 56).

“If you look at the security architecture as a whole, it is clear that also the global cooperation is playing an important role because it is part of contributing to the stability worldwide. And when you can prevent crises, you have better stability, you have also less propensity for conflicts, for crises, for huge movements of people, within countries but also over borders, and this kind of understanding has been lost.” (IP8 Pos 55)

She sees promoting “this kind of understanding” of development cooperation as key to securing support amid “the general movement towards local interests and more conservative, nationalist thinking” (IP8 Pos 56).

This contrast of attitudes sheds fascinating light on how such political narratives can be interpreted and responded to within the same sector.

7.2.2 Corporatising NGOs: focus on monitoring and evaluation

The political incentivisation of increased private actor involvement in the Swiss development cooperation sector seems to be reflected in new projects’ design and terminology (See section 2.3.1 & 6.3.3.). For example, Roger describes that project proposals reflect a stronger emphasis on accountability, and that during implementation greater attention is paid to monitoring and

evaluation frameworks (IP3 Pos 179). This ensures easier documentation and communication through quantifiable indicators.

This naturalising of elements of private sector thinking, Roger suggests, may have led his NGO to incorporate “this kind of private sector language or this business logic into how we design projects” (IP3 Pos 179). The terminology used aims at mimicking business contracts and form the backbone of this increasing economical orientation of projects, although the extent of this shift remains difficult to assess: “I couldn’t tell you for sure” (IP3 Pos 179).

7.2.3 Adapting project framings according to funding eligibility

Despite the thematic and regional focus reorientations that SDC publishes in the ICS every 4 years, some NGOs manage to reframe their ongoing projects quite effortlessly in line with these reorientations to continue receiving SDC contributions. Hans explains that NGOs have longstanding experience adapting to such shifts by emphasising different aspects in new funding requests. For example, an agricultural program might be framed as addressing climate change, gender equality, or food security depending on current funding priorities. NGOs may “put a different label on [the] programme” when “there’s more green funds” available, while continuing similar activities on the ground (IP6 Pos 264).

According to Hans, such reframing is possible because development work is inherently “always holistic” and can address multiple thematic dimensions simultaneously. Such readiness for adaptation has been a prerequisite for certain projects’ success or even just survival for “the last 20 years”, because of the increasing political scrutiny development cooperation has been under (IP6 Pos 264).

7.3 Changes and adaptations in NGO operations

In this section, I analyse more practical changes in operative structures of NGOs because of political shifts.

7.3.1 Implementing quality control procedures and measures

Reporting measurable results, ensuring accountability and documenting outcomes as detailed and as quantifiable as possible have become a focal point for Swiss development NGOs. Frequently, interviewees linked this to institutional and political requests, i.e. from SDC and MPs.

“The whole monitoring, evaluation systems we have in place are much more sophisticated than we had in the past” (IP3 Pos 144). Since Roger’s NGO is expected to systematically measure “each (and) every tiny fact and change” and translate them into quantifiable indicators, they invested “a lot” into sophisticated monitoring and evaluation systems (IP3 Pos 144). Additionally, they assess long-term impacts of their programmes more scientifically now by conducting “tracer studies” (IP3 Pos 145). These are conducted after their programmes have concluded to determine i.e. whether locals’ livelihoods have noticeably stabilised or improved, whether more people “can make a living because of the training they received many years ago”, etc. (IP3 Pos 145).

This growing focus on impact measurement is also associated with higher administrative costs. Ursula mentions how some of her NGO’s donors send “external evaluators [to us] and conduct audits” that scrutinise financial reporting processes, potentially determining that certain expenditures are not “eligible costs for them” to cover (IP5 Pos 32). Consequently, her NGO must ensure they follow expected business standards, i.e. strict “procurement requirements” such as “always obtaining three offers, always putting contracts out to tender”, etc. (IP5 Pos 32). Especially for projects in difficult, “conflict-affected” contexts, “our costs to meet these standards are very high” (IP5 Pos 32). Ursula’s NGO invests a lot of resources “in compliance, in training of our teams” (IP5 Pos 37). She does not just see this negatively, but thinks it is “also positive, because it leads to better quality of work” (IP5 Pos 38).

For Hans’ NGO, these developments have had large administrative implications as well, as the workload has increased massively:

“It’s more administrative tasks, it’s more detailed planning, it’s more detailed monitoring, it’s more auditing, it’s more evaluations, it’s more studies, it’s just really to make sure, as sure as possible, that everything we do is being monitored all the time.” (IP6 Pos. 131)

Activities of executive staff in his NGO now consist of “much more time in the administrative part”, whereas before it was much more about programme development (IP6 Pos 131). This

simultaneously creates tensions with localisation efforts and the prevailing business logic that prioritises short-term profit and impact maximisation. Hans says these requirements hamper including “more the Global South [actors], we want to decolonise, we want to have locally-led [projects]” (IP6 Pos 136). Meanwhile, the focus on quick impact maximisation causes donors to expect impacts in “much narrower” timeframes than in the past, hindering any real “substantial changes” (IP6 Pos 240).

Adaptations made in Sandra’s NGO’s administrative structures to comply with rising reporting requirements are becoming disproportionate to the relatively small scale of her NGO’s programmes:

“There's always a certain balance holding or also questions related to the structure of the organisation: How do we want to restructure ourselves to be able to answer to the new requirements? And I think we are not alone with these questions, this has been a development in the NGO sector for the past 10,20 years or so.” (IP7 Pos 308)

In contradiction to most interviewees’ burdensome descriptions, Monika provides a more positive view. This stronger focus on impact measurement “has brought the sector to an extreme high knowledge of how to bring about change”, which she frames almost as a paradigm shift (IP9 Pos 71). Novel project framings such as theories of change have readjusted the sector’s focus back to the “impact level” and have helped NGOs understand better how their actions and other “factors intermingle or interconnect with each other” and result in systemic outcomes (IP9 Pos 71). She acknowledges that this “philosophy”, this “culture change” is demanding to implement, but thinks it fosters beneficial, impact-oriented thinking (IP9 Pos 95).

Furthermore, contradictory to Hans’ point, Monika sees this change as actually supporting localisation efforts. When planning interventions around impacts, localisation becomes “inherent” to development projects: “it’s logic” (IP9 Pos 96). Since “local partners know best what is needed” and their initiatives presumably yield better results than ones planned “in Zurich”, impact and effectivity orientation has shifted authority to local actors, developing a “culture that is going in the right direction” (IP9 Pos 96).

Detailed quantitative reporting systems result in NGO project reports consisting of “Excel sheets [of] just figures, figures, figures” (IP3 Pos 118). Roger perceives increasing pressure for the use of these systems as stemming from a “political request” to see easily measurable impacts of SDC supported NGO projects (IP3 Pos 144).

Adhering to these strict rules requires high operational costs and meticulous quality of work, as not complying with the requirements carries severe reputational risks (IP5 Pos 32). Such risks became reality for one of my interviewees¹², whose NGO and management executives were singled out by media outlets and right-wing politicians for an accounting mishap.

7.3.2 Ending and adapting projects and programmes

Some of the most tangible reactions that political decisions have caused in the Swiss development sector include the discontinuation of certain thematic and/or regional programmes, reductions in organisational structures and staff layoffs. Several interviewees noted how these operational consequences were unavoidable and directly caused by reduced ODA budgets as well as SDC’s shifting thematic priorities.

Manuela explains how ODA budget cuts forced her NGO to “decrease by 10% what we had planned initially for 2025” while “other NGOs had to cut like up to 20%” due to their substantial dependence on SDC (IP1 Pos 104). A long-standing working partnership with another NGO, “a really good partner”, was terminated not because it was not successful, but because their “hands were tied” (IP1 Pos 387). While Manuela’s NGO has not faced institutional fears of survival, such decisions are still ethically challenging for her (IP1 Pos 388).

Operative impacts for NGOs’ engagements have also resulted from SDC’s strategic regional reorientations. When SDC withdrew strategically from Latin America, Roger’s NGO was heavily affected since they were implementing many projects in the region (BS Pos 158). Not wanting to close their programmes there, “we had to try to substitute with other donors, with private money from foundations, from philanthropy, which is not so easy” (IP3 Pos 158). This demonstrates a

¹² Due to potentially identifying information, the name of the interviewee has been omitted in this instance in order to prevent the identification of the individual.

strong commitment to their goals and the communities in the Global South: the internal NGO solution of closing a programme when funding dries up would practically be a lot easier than rallying alternative donors, but they choose the difficult solution.

The SDC's decision to end their foci in countries such as Bangladesh, Albania and Zambia also created operational uncertainty along with disbelief for NGOs:

“They say, there is no need anymore, but it's like one of the countries with the biggest need for it! You have the biggest refugee camp in the world in Bangladesh and it's an unresolved issue.” (IP3 Pos 158)

For Ursula's NGO, SDC's withdrawal from Latin America made organisational adaptations such as “structural reductions” and laying off staff necessary, too (IP5 Pos 147). As the budget “volume” for their programmes in one country dropped by more than 60%, they had no choice but to make these difficult decisions, which also created more awareness within her NGO of their own vulnerability from relying on a single major donor (IP5 Pos 151). Consequently, efforts to diversify their funding sources to reduce future financial dependency risks were taken (IP5 Pos 151).

Internal adjustments within Hans' NGO's domestic structures were also triggered by SDC reorientations. Organisational priorities and values were reevaluated in light of these reorientations and reduced funding, which led to their withdrawal from certain countries where they had a long history of activity (IP6 Pos 189). They also reduced domestic staff by approximately 20% over the past two years (IP6 Pos 191).

7.3.3 Branching out into humanitarian aid

In response to government funding priorities increasingly shifting toward humanitarian assistance, some NGOs accordingly expanded their activities in this field. When Roger and his NGO found that “Switzerland is shifting money from long-term cooperation towards short-term humanitarian aid” (IP3 Pos 19)¹³, they deliberately began to build a stronger humanitarian profile

¹³ For a breakdown of SDC's expenditure allocation according to development cooperation and humanitarian aid purposes, see this SDC website (SDC, 2025a). Although the development-humanitarian

in order to remain eligible for these funds in the future (IP3 Pos 141). Roger says this structural shift was necessary “to survive as an organisation” and that it resulted from (IP3 Pos 19).

“So it's not something we have been doing since the beginning, but it's really like a new kind of way of working we have...”

Interviewer:

So, but you would say that is, to a large degree, that shift came about because of the political atmosphere change?

IP3:

Yes.” (IP3 Pos 27-32)

7.3.4 Implementing internal due diligence

Increased political scrutiny on development NGOs led one to institutionalise stricter accountability mechanisms. For Roger’s NGO, the civil society movement of the KoVI made them introduce a new due diligence process. As part of the “Koalition für Konzernverantwortung” (coalition for corporate responsibility) themselves, which promotes the eponymous political initiative, Roger’s NGO reflected on whether they “walk the talk regarding human rights and environment” (IP3 Pos 202). They realised existing practices for assessing their working partnerships were not “in a standardised manner” and that not meeting the same standards that they were advocating publicly for companies to meet posed a substantial reputational risk (IP3 Pos 202).

“That's when we started to develop our own human rights due diligence procedure, in line with international standards, and this is in place today.” (IP3 Pos 203)

Potential partners of the NGO are now screened by “people from different departments who have then to discuss the results” and they have “been doing it for now roughly 3 years” in this standardised manner (IP3 Pos 203).

expenditure split has improved in favour of the latter since 2021, I do not recognise a very significant shift in the three following years.

7.4 Strategic adaptations of NGOs

In this section, I focus on strategic changes and adaptations of Swiss development NGOs resulting from changing domestic political circumstances.

7.4.1 Building NGO alliances and maintaining sectoral solidarity

Building collaborations and alliances among Swiss NGOs was repeatedly highlighted as an important action. They are valued to pool resources, exchange knowledge, reinforce political advocacy efforts, coordinate approaches and expand organisational capacities, all ultimately useful for maintaining or improving their standing in the Swiss political arena. Manuela explained how involvement in an NGO alliance enables staff to participate in learning groups and strategic exchanges “that you wouldn't be able to do otherwise alone” (IP1 Pos 285). Since cofounding the alliance in 2020, her NGO has been profited a lot from interacting with its wide range of actors.

Several interviewees referred to an umbrella organisation they are part of as an important platform through which their individual NGOs coordinate and engage with political decision-makers¹⁴. Thomas' NGO relies on its collective structures to address political “tension fields” through “position papers” that reflect the alliance's shared values, which therefore receive more attention in Parliament (IP2 Pos 128). Similarly, while individual NGOs often focus on their advocacy in specific thematic areas, Christian notes the added usefulness of the alliance's networking and advocacy (IP4 Pos 96). Contrarily, despite her NGO being an active member, Ursula claims that the alliance's political advocacy efforts may not be received openly by certain politicians because “they are looked at as being too ‘leftist’” (IP5 Pos 274).

Hans describes a sort of ‘reverse’ dynamic. Through the same alliance, his NGO was able to strengthen its own political voice instead of relying on the alliance to articulate it. His NGO's relatively recent venture into engaging with political debates in Switzerland was partly brought about by their membership in the alliance but also through involvement with civil society

¹⁴ Name of umbrella organisation withheld due to potential of revealing identity of interviewees whose NGOs are members.

initiatives such as the KoVI (DR Pos 29). Membership in the alliance helped to “sharpen our profile and make statements about specific issues, topics we work in” (IP6 Pos 29).

Beyond such formally recognised alliances, there seems to be an inherent awareness of how varying “strategic orientations” effectively complement each other within the Swiss NGO sector (IP4 Pos 97). Regarding “social politics”, Christian’s NGO has a particularly well-established reputation and can “do much more [political] advocacy” in that area, while other NGOs “can act as experts” for other thematic areas that they focus on (IP4 Pos 97). This acknowledgement of whose expertise and outreach is most suitable for advocating for specific issues and strategically knowing when not to engage oneself is also linked to a sense of solidarity within the sector. It helps especially when responding to external criticism or political pressure. After a period of “attacks from the right wing” through “individual newspapers” (see section 6.3.5.), Hans emphasised the importance of standing together as a sector (IP6 Pos 214).

Furthermore, acts of quite spontaneous collective mobilisation in response to specific political proposals have aided to combat political movements against the interests of Swiss development NGOs. As the “FDP wanted to take the tax exemption away from NGOs and it was very popular in Parliament”, Maria’s NGO went about establishing a broad network of like-minded organisations even beyond the development cooperation sector who opposed this parliamentary motion, because “it would have affected” them, too (IP8 Pos 203). Her NGO successfully fought off this motion through this collective mobilisation, and they have “kept that strategy up” in similar situations since (IP8 Pos 204).

7.4.2 Sharpening and ‘corporatising’ NGO management

Growing political demand for accountability and quantifiable results from Swiss development NGOs has driven them to operationally (see chapter 7.3.1.) and strategically adapt to economic efficiency logics. They now prioritise measurable results and impact documentation “in hard facts and figures” (IP3 Pos 119) in project designs, as this helps legitimise them to donors, politicians and potential private sector partners. By contrast, projects that invest in less tangible outcomes such as “soft skills, people’s ability to speak up [politically], or local governments being more

transparent” are increasingly sidelined (IP3 Pos 119). Roger’s NGO’s strategic emphasis shifts away from such projects happened “over the last 10 or 15 years” (IP3 Pos 119).

Development NGOs have also strategically adjusted to the increasing demand for time-efficient results, aligning with economic ‘quick returns’ logic. For example, Hans states his NGO had to realign internal strategies, even though he knows “we’re not going to be able to show a contribution to [measurable] substantial change within [target societies]” in the often-required tight timeframes (IP6 Pos 240).

Furthermore, Roger’s NGO now promotes projects that ideally have “immediate, short-term impact, but also long-term impact” (IP3 Pos 149). Demonstrating measurable and visible impact across varying time horizons allows NGOs to generate input for reporting requirements as well as making a “good story” for public communication purposes (IP3 Pos 149). However, Roger claims that prioritising measurable outcomes causes frictions with other strategic objectives, such as localisation commitments: “this is more challenging than in the past” (IP3 Pos 180).

Another strategic adjustment is the way NGOs alter their organisational self-understanding. Ursula now sees her NGO more as a “service provider” to a plethora of actors: governments, the World Bank, local CSOs and others (IP5 Pos 156). Sandra also talks of a general ‘re-economisation’ of Swiss development cooperation characterised by increased professionalisation and administrative demands (IP7 Pos 308; Pos 317).

Christian sees his NGO as responding to needs articulated by local partners and therefore acting “much more like a service provider”, which challenges existing NGO stereotypes as actors who are not very “oriented toward economic standards” (IP4 Pos 38). His NGO has experienced “a lot of professionalisation” which reflects the general trend of economic, efficiency-oriented organisational repositioning of Swiss development NGOs (IP4 Pos 38).

7.4.3 Negotiating dependency: Relations with the SDC

While the SDC financially supports the activities of development NGOs, interviewees portray the relationship with SDC as one-sided. Since the long-term presence of SDC in a country of NGO intervention strongly influences the NGO’s work there, Ursula recounts how her NGO’s standing

towards SDC changed when the latter decided to exclude Latin America as a focal region in 2024 (IP5 Pos 77). From a perceived cooperation based on mutual appreciation for the necessity of projects on the ground, the true nature of the relationship became clear: Ursula's NGO relied heavily on the SDC for political backing in negotiations with local governments, for implementing projects and most importantly for their financial "generosity" in covering a lot of administrative and other costs (IP5 Pos 77; Pos 81; Pos 82).

NGOs also owe SDC transparency and accountability for the funds they receive, creating pressured working environments:

"The SDC, if you aren't always transparent, they could say, 'OK, that's it for your funding; we won't be funding any more of your projects,' and the impact that would have on an aid organisation is absolutely massive. So we're under a huge, huge amount of pressure to be accountable." (IP5 Pos 32)

Building up a collection of new donors was Ursula's NGO's reaction to SDC's 'pull-out' from Latin America, though SDC still seems to be the principal donor (IP5 Pos 151). Thus, Ursula makes sure to remind them of the benefits her NGO gives them. For example, since SDC is "not allowed to" publish media reports that are "awareness-raising" in Switzerland, but her NGO is, she reminded SDC of this mutually beneficial activity when "SDC didn't want to fund us anymore in (country in Central America)¹⁵" (IP5 Pos 274). Equally, however, this means her NGO must ensure "that we speak on behalf of the SDC or the government" in these media reports and that they do not criticise SDC or "say that we don't have enough money" from them (IP5 Pos 274). These dynamics shows how an NGO and the SDC are unequally and complexly relationally intertwined.

Hans' NGO has at times been forced to adapt to SDC's strategic adjustments in very limited timeframes, including the changing of their focus regions (IP6 Pos 190), their budgetary requirements (IP6 Pos 131) as well as their reporting requirements (IP6 Pos 239-240). When entire thematic priorities of development cooperation and their SDC programmes get discontinued, as in

¹⁵ Country name withheld due to potential of identifying the NGO and/or Ursula through this information.

the case of vocational and educational training (VET), “this brings [our] programmes to a stop. That’s a very causal link” (IP6 Pos 263). However, NGOs cannot do much about it in their dependent position:

“We are in the same boat as SDC. So we are not going to be debating SDC publicly or their decisions, because it's the right-wing politicians that would profit much more. So if (name of NGO) and (name of another NGO) and civil society actors go into a public debate with SDC about priorities or bad decisions or good decisions, we don't want that.” (IP6 Pos 190)

Just like with Ursula, Hans’ NGO cannot risk a publicly bad relationship, as this would play into the hands of antagonistic political actors: it would “give more bait to right-wing politicians to say ‘see, [development cooperation] doesn’t work, they don’t even agree within their own club” (IP6 Pos 190).

One interviewee reported more of a “love-hate relationship” between their NGO and SDC¹⁶. As the private sector engagement ramped up “a few years ago” and SDC’s task was to incentivise PPPs, they had “no strategy, no clue, no plan how to do it”. The NGO levied its parliamentary influence so that SDC was forced to strategically consider the way they advocated for PPPs, making them include the requirement for NGOs to follow “strict criteria about who you work with” and conduct “strong evaluations” of potential partners. The NGO helped the SDC develop a sound strategy, at first making SDC representatives “annoyed because they had to do things that they didn’t want to do” but eventually making them appreciative of the NGO “because it forced them to think it through more strategically”, which allowed for a more comprehensive result.

7.4.4 Diversifying funding

Increasingly uncertain and competitive funding environments have prompted many development NGOs to strategically diversify their income sources, particularly when recognising their financial dependency on SDC. Interviewees became (more) aware of this cluster risk through Parliament’s recent ODA budget reductions. Long-term reliance on SDC funding means even a

¹⁶ Due to potentially identifying information, indicative references linking the specific interviewee to the quoted statements have been omitted in this paragraph.

“10%, 20% decrease” may result in “institutional problems” (IP1 Pos 356). Manuela says her NGO “never wanted to get that far” and has always made sure they “had a wide array of donors, institutional donors, private donors” (IP1 Pos 356).

Hans knows that SDC’s core contributions pose a cluster risk for his NGO since there was a time when “we became dependent of that” (IP6 Pos 119), but it also “allows us to work in the way we work” and “doesn’t change our integrity” (IP6 Pos 118). To deal with this financial dependency, his NGO “attracts and gets money” from foundations and other sources, but also internally discusses organisational values and activities and how it might adjust to increasing financial restrictions (IP6 Pos 196).

Other NGOs had to proactively pursue alternative funding streams as well. Roger elaborates on how his NGO established offices abroad to be eligible for EU and USAID grants as well as “money from big philanthropies in the US” (IP3 Pos 185).

“This was a reaction to the high dependency on SDC and the realisation that if Switzerland is going to change its policies regarding international cooperation, it will hit us hard, so we need to diversify. That was a strategic decision.” (IP3 Pos 185)

Such adaptations illustrate how NGOs restructure themselves to increase financial resilience. It does not always go to plan, though, because global funding landscapes shift, too. USAID’s factual dissolution has led to actors who were previously reliant on its funds to compete for resources elsewhere, reducing Roger’s NGO’s success rate in SDC mandate applications (IP3 Pos 175). Ursula mentions the same phenomenon and that her NGO’s executives have therefore invested more into comprehensive acquisition strategies (IP5 Pos 177).

Both Sandra’s and Monika’s NGOs are also aware of this reduced availability of funds, but their strategic evaluation of the matter differs. Since Sandra’s NGO has “a niche topic” that their donors “find particularly important”, Sandra is confident that her donors will continue to support them but also knows there might be “less secured money, we [might] have to fundraise more” in the future (IP5 Pos 164). In our conversation, Monika pitches the idea that a more collaborative, united Swiss development association could solve the problem of “competing for resources” independently by complementing each other more effectively (IP9 Pos 141). However, she thinks

there is “still a way to go” for “this kind of strategic thinking” (IP9 Pos 146). Meanwhile, her NGO tries to focus “strategically on [its] strengths in order to have the most impact with fewer resources” (IP9 Pos 132).

A completely different train of strategic thought stems from Maria, who comments that the current unjustified and rigid “austerity discourse”, which is reinforced by MPs’ apparent reverence of the debt brake, could be undermined by “trying to work on ways how Switzerland can generate [additional revenue], generate income maybe from different tax scenarios” (IP8 Pos 179; 178). Considering the parliamentary debt brake debates (see section 6.1.4.), “breaking out” of this discourse could unlock “avenues” to funds for NGOs that were previously politically and institutionally unimaginable: “I think there would be a lot of leeway to twist some technical details and you could free up billions” (IP8 Pos 192).

7.4.5 Re-evaluating private sector engagement/PPPs

Related to their corporatisation, Swiss development NGOs are also increasingly under pressure to engage with private sector actors in PPPs. They are expected to contribute more to safeguarding investment contexts and enabling market access for private companies. Strategic reactions of NGOs have ranged from acceptance to rejection of these principles but mostly have included more differentiated ways of positioning themselves to these expectations.

Such PPPs entail conflicts of interests. While there may be companies that really “want to do good and have patience”, due to their profit-maximising operating logic, it is hard to decipher for NGOs who might entertain compromises for development cooperation’s “long-term perspective” and who is just “seeking a short-term profit” (IP3 Pos 124). Additionally, private sector investment seeks to geographically concentrate itself not in “the poorest countries” where “basic needs” are highest, but in “emerging economies where there is a certain legal security, an investment potential” (IP3 Pos 124). However, Christian fundamentally sees their interests as “not aligned”, meaning the “basic prerequisite for it to work [in the long run] is not met” (IP4 Pos 160).

Despite Roger’s doubts about PPPs, his NGO is involved in various ones, “something which we have built up a lot over the last 10, 15 years I would say” (IP3 Pos 144). He sees “potential” benefits, but nevertheless also highlights that explicit boundary-setting is important:

“We say we work with private companies if they observe certain basic rules, human rights, environmental standards, and so on, transparency, tax evasion, what not. And then we are ready to work with you. If not, then not.” (IP3 Pos 125)

The “huge financial pressure on the whole sector” has made Roger notice a “tendency to lower the bar [and say] ‘we need to survive; we need to compromise more’” (IP3 Pos 195). This leads to many internal debates between those leaning towards more private sector collaboration and those who emphasise clear limits (IP3 Pos 195).

This balancing act between adaptation and continuity also emerged in my conversation with Ursula. Her NGO needs to “rethink their role” and be more open to cooperating with private sector actors, yet she emphasises that despite that they should not lose sight of the NGO’s values (IP5 Pos 101). Her NGO’s management holds “open, totally transparent discussions” (IP5 Pos 212) about such issues, and they pose “internal challenges” (IP5 Pos 211). Yet, while she shares Roger’s opinion that clear rules are needed and responsibilities should be shared, Ursula thinks that “if we join forces better, [PPPs] can really be a win-win situation for both” (IP5 Pos 110).

At the same time, other NGOs involved in areas such as peacebuilding or facilitating dialogues where project results are less tangible are more critical of such collaborations and therefore do not consider them in their strategic orientation: “I don’t see that the objectives go in the same direction” (IP7 Pos 312-313). Hence, PPPs are initiated and determined by the private actor’s interests and the NGO’s areas of engagement, but NGOs that are not engaged in areas of interest to private actors cannot or do not consider PPPs as an opportunity to access an alternative funding source.

7.4.6 Enacting localisation/decolonisation efforts

Calls from various stakeholders within the development realm for localisation and decolonisation (see section 7.1.4.) made NGOs adapt organisational structures, partnerships and working modalities. Maria’s NGO recognises a “general awareness that there is still a problem” (IP8 Pos 167). As such, they consolidated “a joint position on localisation” with other NGOs to lay the foundation for shifting power toward local actors (IP8 Pos 168).

One key shift is to transfer decision-making power to local actors and encourage locally-led project designs and implementation. Monika claims this “prevents us to do things that do harm”

and that this approach is implicitly “inherent” within the strategic adaptations towards impact orientation her NGO has made (IP9 Pos 96).

A “future strategic project” of “pooling technical knowledge” and of decentralising executive roles is ongoing at Christian’s NGO (IP4 Pos 34). Headquarter-based roles should gradually become more open to staff in country offices so locally embedded expertise can be integrated into managerial decisions better, overcoming hierarchical power imbalances (IP4 Pos 34). His NGO is “very much at the start” of this process and it may take “2, 3 more years” to implement, but this strategically protects them from political accusations of being a colonial enterprise.

However, positions across NGOs are not uniform. Hans outlines how increasing administrative requirements limit the extent to which decision-making powers can be transferred to local actors (see section 6.2.1.). Currently, however, his NGO may not need to adapt much to comply with SDC’s new strategic focus on LLC. To Hans, “decolonisation” and LLC are two “big buzzwords” right now, signalling the importance of “planning on eye-to-eye level”, but are nothing new for his NGO: “that’s what we do since [for]ever, that’s how we work” (IP6 Pos 127).

Although his NGO has also strategically committed to the localisation cause, Roger warns that local empowerment may also stand at odds with guaranteeing “basic quality standards” to donors: “management and close monitoring” becomes more challenging, and “you have to bring that together in a way” (IP3 Pos 180).

7.5 Looking into the future: Anticipated adaptations

In this last chapter of my findings, I summarise some points my interviewees made regarding their expectations for the future.

7.5.1 Finding balance: adapting while keeping integrity

Remaining flexible and adaptable in response to changing political, financial and institutional environments is key for surviving to my interviewees. For example, Manuela emphasises that NGOs need to become “more flexible, more innovative, try new approaches” and draw on additional “technical know-how” to respond to evolving circumstances (IP1 Pos 252). NGOs’ futures depend

on “how flexible and how adaptable you are”, so NGOs that continue working “in the same old school way” risk becoming outdated and going out of business (IP1 Pos 268).

For Thomas, future changes could be “minor, but more probably changes are major and we need to adapt” (IP2 Pos 159), making the definition of strategic procedures to deal with adaptations essential. Remaining resilient is important to Thomas, too. He alludes for example to right-wing political actors’ declining willingness to engage in dialogue and how this has not reduced his own engagement efforts; on the contrary, he feels “more motivation, I’m triggered to fight against these trends and debate” (IP2 Pos. 152). His statement illustrates both the continued resilience within the sector to reach politically sceptical audiences and the practical limits NGOs face when trying to do so.

Christian emphasises that adaptations require strategies that remain sufficiently flexible so that NGOs can adjust their project portfolios to changing contexts while still “following the guiding principles” of their organisations (MG Pos. 70). Staying true to their integral organisational values and missions remained a key concern across the board.

This balancing act between adaptation and continuity also emerged in Ursula’s interview. Debates about organisational change are also connected to broader reflections on values and organisational purpose. Hans describes discussions about whether financial pressures may push his NGO to narrow their activities or redefine their role (IP6 Pos 196). These debates are closely linked “self-definition” and the “integrity of our work” as a value-driven organisation (IP6 Pos 197). Similarly, Maria emphasises that many NGOs will need to reconsider “what you're doing [and] how you're doing it” (IP8 Pos 173). Her own NGO remains committed to “a more just world” and fairer Global North-South relations (IP8 Pos 211).

These tensions between adaptation and continuity are visible for all development NGOs, where funding cuts are prompting “internal discussions to narrow their mandates” and to focus more on organisational self-interest, while at the same time other actors remain “completely convinced of their mission, their mandate”, spotlighting ongoing negotiations within the sector about the extent of strategic flexibility that does not compromise core purposes (IP8 Pos 209-210).

8 Discussion: NGOs in the complex, power-imbalanced Swiss political assemblage

Broadly speaking, domestic political shifts in Switzerland affect the operative strategies, narratives and organisational practices of Swiss development NGOs in myriad, non-linear ways. Rather than understanding these effects as top-down policy impacts, the findings seen through the lens of my conceptual framework indicate a more inter-relational process. Political change alters the wider environments of NGOs, and to secure funding, legitimacy, influence and strategic room for manoeuvre, they reconfigure external relations and mediate external impacts into internal adaptations. Budget reductions, changing parliamentary dynamics, security discourses, and growing demands for measurable impact do not operate separately. They interact to reshape the assemblage of conditions, to which NGOs adapt.

The conceptual framework developed in this thesis interprets these dynamics across multiple scales. Assemblage theory allows understanding of how NGOs are embedded in shifting configurations of individuals, organisations, institutions, discourses and regulations. Brokerage theory helps explain how NGOs and their representatives attempt to mediate within these changing environments. Katz's concepts of reworking, resistance and resilience further illuminate the various forms of adaptation in everyday organisational practices. In sum, I suggest that impacts on NGOs from changing domestic political conditions and their adaptations to them are best understood as negotiated relational repositioning rather than as straightforward organisational reactions.

8.1 Reconfigured Political Assemblages

As it is always in flux, the contemporary Swiss political assemblage differs from previous more stable states where consensus-orientation was stronger, and governance arrangements were less contested. Rising parliamentary polarisation, rightward political shifts, fiscal austerity, stronger migration framings and international geopolitical crises have altered how development aid is debated and allocated. Yet these domestic political changes affect foreign aid not as a simple external shock, but by reorganising the relations within the assemblage itself.

8.1.1 Parliament as a central node in NGO environments

A central finding of my study is that Parliament was identified by most interviewees as the most influential domestic actor affecting development NGOs. This was not only because of formal authority over budgets, but because parliamentary debates increasingly structure the wider political climate in which development cooperation is discussed. Interviewees repeatedly referred to stronger polarisation, a rightward drift, and the declining willingness of parties to compromise. Several interviewees perceived the repositioning of the FDP and partly ‘The Centre’ as particularly significant because of their large number of seats and their MPs thus acting as tips in the balance in parliamentary decisions. Generally, as their formerly more open stance to development cooperation spending narrows, this contributes to an unfavourable political atmosphere for NGOs (see section 6.1).

Parliament makes for a good assemblage reading of politics. It does not matter merely as a single institution issuing decisions from above; its significance lies in how it connects party ideologies, fiscal narratives, state agencies, media debate and public legitimacy (see section 3.4, 3.5 & 6.1). As my conceptual framework argues, power in assemblages is distributed rather than located in one place. Parliamentary change therefore matters because it reorganises multiple relations simultaneously.

8.1.2 Budget cuts as relational outcomes, not isolated decisions

Across interviews, budget cuts emerged as the most tangible consequence of domestic political shifts. However, these cuts were not presented as the result of one single anti-aid preference. Instead, they were linked to several interacting pressures: defence spending after the war in Ukraine, fears around European insecurity, the debt brake, and international examples such as USAID dissolution or reductions in EU countries (see section 6.1.). Interviewees explicitly described Switzerland and more specifically certain MPs as following or wanting to follow wider international trends (e.g. see section 6.1.1 and 6.1.3.)

This is analytically important because it shows that political NGO pressures arise through converging discursive and geopolitical processes. Funding reductions are therefore assemblage outcomes: produced through the coming together of austerity logic in state budget planning,

national security politics, calls for policy imitation (see section 6.1.2.) and competition between political parties. For example, budget cuts' relation to the latter issue stems from changing inter-party dynamics: to 'recoup' some of SVP's policy-making powers, parties like FDP and 'The Centre' drift towards their political positions, e.g. aversion to international cooperation funding. This helps explain why adaptation cannot be reduced to a simple donor-recipient relationship.

8.1.3 The state as internally differentiated

The findings also complicate any singular understanding of 'the state'. While Parliament was viewed as decisive for funding levels, interviewees also described the SDC as strategically constrained and at times sympathetic to NGO concerns. Several respondents argued that unpopular SDC decisions, such as country pull-outs, should ultimately be attributed to parliamentary budget pressure rather than to SDC preferences (see section 6.2.4.). At the same time, increasing involvement of the FDFA and the strong influence of Ignazio Cassis were seen as shifting SDC priorities towards broader foreign policy and private-sector agendas (see section 6.2.5.).

This reflects 'relations of exteriority' mentioned in my conceptual framework: institutions retain partial autonomy yet are reshaped through changing relations with other actors. 'The state' emerges here as a contested assemblage of ministries, departments and political leadership with unequal internal authority.

8.1.4 Governance and technologies of control

Another well-evidenced finding concerns reporting systems, accountability demands and quantitative evaluation. Many interviewees described increasingly detailed evaluations, sophisticated reporting systems, audit pressures and demands to demonstrate visible impacts for each Franc spent (see section 7.3.1.). Several considered these requirements stricter than in other policy fields (see section 6.2.1.).

These mechanisms should not be treated as neutral administrative regulations. In line with political-geographical assemblage approaches in my framework, devices such as reporting formats, indicators and compliance systems needed to adhere to regulations actively shape practice (see section 7.3.1.). They redirect staff time, favour measurable interventions, and pressure NGOs to

adopt managerial logics (see sections 7.3.1. & 7.4.2.). Political change is therefore mediated not only through rhetoric, decision-making and initiatives in Switzerland, but through mundane governance technologies.

8.1.5 Discursive restructuring of legitimacy

The findings further show that political shifts operate through discourse. Security is increasingly framed in narrow militaristic terms, while development cooperation is often presented as dispensable (see section 7.2.1.). At the same time, migration-control narratives and claims about private-sector efficiency have entered debates about development priorities (see section 7.2.1.2. & 7.2.2.). Some interviewees contrasted this with their own views and understandings of security based on prevention, stability and global interdependence.

These discursive shifts matter because they redefine what counts as politically legitimate. NGOs are therefore pressured not only by fewer resources, but by changing public framings of delegitimization or justification development cooperation.

8.2 Brokerage, Mediation and NGO Agency

NGO agency in the Swiss development assemblage is best understood as relational rather than autonomous. NGOs do not simply respond to political pressures from outside the system; they exercise influence by brokering between Parliament, state agencies, publics, private actors, and partner NGOs. Unequal access to resources and decision-makers means that this mediating capacity is distributed unevenly.

8.2.1 NGOs as mediators between political worlds

While assemblage theory helps explain changing environments, brokerage theory helps explain how NGOs act within them. The findings show that NGOs are not just passive recipients of political pressure, but continually mediate between different arenas: Parliament, the public, state agencies, sectoral alliances, partner organisations abroad and within internal structures.

This becomes especially visible in repeated calls to “communicate better” with the Swiss public. Respondents discussed the need for stronger and moving storytelling, better use of social media,

more visible campaigns and clearer explanations of why development cooperation matters see (see section 7.1.1.). Yet they also recognised the tension between simplification and accurately representing complex engagements.

This closely reflects brokerage theory: actors translate between different audiences with different terminologies, expectations and forms of legitimacy. NGOs must convert complex transnational realities into politically persuasive domestic narratives.

8.2.2 Internal mediation and organisational change

Brokerage also occurs internally. Political signals such as austerity, funding uncertainty or new donor criteria do not automatically produce change. They are interpreted by NGO managers and staff who decide whether to diversify funding, strengthen management systems, enter humanitarian work or revise programme portfolios (see sections 7.3.1., 7.3.2., 7.3.3. & 7.4.4.). These operative decisions are also accompanied by more process-related adaptations of internal procedures and mechanisms, such as sharper management structures, strategic reviews and new organisational priorities (see sections 7.4.2., 7.4.3. & 7.4.5.).

This demonstrates that adaptation is socially mediated rather than mechanically imposed. It is a relational process of adaptation: individual NGO actors interpret external change and construct appropriate responses.

8.2.3 Coalition-building as collective brokerage

Several respondents emphasised alliances, sector solidarity and speaking “with one voice” for all Swiss development NGOs (see section 7.4.1.). This suggests brokerage is not only individual but collective. Umbrella organisations and NGO coalitions can aggregate fragmented interests into stronger political representation. NGOs recognise they have limited influence alone in a more hostile political environment, and the benefits of one particular alliance to combat isolation effects was highlighted, while cross-sectoral partnerships with private actors split opinions (see section 7.4.5.).

8.2.4 Positionality and unequal access

The findings also show that brokerage capacities are unequal. Some NGO actors unavoidably possess better parliamentary access through MPs, stronger formal and informal networks or more media visibility than others, due to varying resource capacities (see sections 6.3.5., 7.1.2. & 7.4.1.). For example, Hans distinguished between formal consultation processes and the realities of influence, where participation appeared symbolic or where NGOs felt their input was ignored (see 6.2.2.). Effective brokerage therefore depends not only on knowledge and material resources, but also on positionality as well as social and symbolic resources within unequal political fields.

8.3 Reworking, Resistance and Resilience

Katz's categories are particularly useful because the findings show that adaptation in the development sector is not one singular process.

8.3.1 Reworking

Many responses are best understood as reworking: pragmatic adjustments made within existing constraints. Examples include investing in communication capacity, reframing development cooperation as part of international security, aligning proposals with donor eligibility criteria, strengthening monitoring systems, improving quality control, diversifying funding sources, or expanding into humanitarian aid (for examples see sections 7.2.2., 7.2.3. & 7.4.4.). Localisation and decolonisation efforts were also discussed not only normatively, but as strategically necessary in tighter domestic funding environments (see section 7.4.6.).

These actions do not fundamentally challenge the system, but seek to improve organisational viability within it.

8.3.2 Resistance

Other responses fit a resistance framing better: attempts to challenge or push back against dominant pressures. Interviewees criticised the narrow militaristic perspective in security debates, the use of aid to deter migration, symbolic consultation exercises, and assumptions that private companies can “solve” poverty through market-based incentives alone (see sections 7.2.1. & 7.4.5.).

Some also defended NGOs' right to engage politically despite criticism that they should remain silent (see section 6.2.3.).

Such practices matter because they show NGOs are not merely adaptive organisations. They also contest the terms under which this adaptation is demanded.

8.3.3 Resilience

Finally, resilience appears in the NGOs commitments to continue despite uncertain circumstances. Respondents emphasised remaining true to organisational values, preserving solidarity, sustaining relationships with the SDC even under tension, and staying flexible, agile and innovative without abandoning core missions (see section 7.4.1., 7.4.3. & 7.5.1.). References to Swiss humanitarian traditions and enduring public support for cooperation also suggest that NGOs might draw on longer-standing moral resources beyond immediate political cycles (see section 6.3.6.).

Resilience here is not simple endurance. It is the capacity to preserve purpose while operating under more volatile conditions.

8.4 Conclusion / Answering the Research Question

This thesis asked how domestic political shifts in Switzerland affect the operative strategies, narratives and organisational practices of Swiss development NGOs. The findings show that these effects are substantial, but rarely direct. Political change works by reshaping the wider circumstances in which NGOs operate: parliamentary dynamics, funding flows, state priorities, public discourse, accountability demands and the legitimacy of international solidarity itself.

Swiss NGOs therefore face a dual challenge. They must respond procedurally and structurally to shrinking resources and changing governance demands, while also responding politically to new narratives around security, migration and national interest. Yet they are not powerless. Through mediation, coalition-building, strategic adjustment and selective contestation, NGOs continue to shape their own room for manoeuvre.

The Swiss political context is especially impactful because direct democracy, strong consultation traditions, fiscal conservatism and humanitarian self-understandings coexist with increasing polarisation and nationalist pressures like nowhere else. NGO adaptation here is therefore not simply about organisational survival. It is about defending and renegotiating the public meaning of solidarity, development and Switzerland's role in an increasingly unsettled world.

The identified dynamics are not unique to the Swiss case. Across many European and OECD donor countries, development cooperation is increasingly shaped by fiscal restraint, migration politics, security agendas, and demands for visible national returns, placing NGOs under similar pressures to adapt strategically and organisationally. The Swiss case therefore contributes to a wider understanding of how domestic political transformations within donor states reshape the conditions of development NGOs and aid per se, and suggests that its future will depend not only on needs in recipient contexts, but also on how NGOs and other actors navigate contested political assemblages at home.

8.5 Critical reflection and outlook

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the interview design placed considerable emphasis on recent budget cuts and their consequences for Swiss development NGOs. While this focus was justified given the salience of funding reductions in the political debate, it may also have directed attention towards financial pressures and away from other relevant dynamics that might otherwise have emerged more strongly, such as organisational culture, leadership change, digital transformation, or longer-term shifts in advocacy strategy. Second, although the conceptual framework incorporated brokerage theory, the empirical analysis remained more focused on external political environments and organisational responses than on the concrete internal processes through which adaptation is enacted. Interviewees often described changes at a strategic or executive level, but less frequently detailed who initiated specific adaptations, how decisions were negotiated internally, or how responsibilities were distributed across staff roles and hierarchies. Third, a larger number of interviews could have broadened the range of perspectives included, particularly across different NGO sizes, thematic sectors, and organisational positions.

These limitations also point towards promising directions for future research. In particular, brokerage theory could be employed more centrally to examine the micro-politics of adaptation within and between organisations. Such an approach would make visible which actors connect organisations to political institutions, donors, media arenas, and partner networks, and how these connections are maintained, reconfigured, or strategically mobilised over time. In the Swiss context, this would be especially valuable for analysing how NGOs navigate federal institutions, parliamentary committees, popular vote campaigns, and multilingual public spheres that require differentiated strategies of access and communication. It would also allow closer analysis of internal divisions of labour: which staff members interpret political change, broker compromises, build coalitions, maintain access, or translate external pressures into organisational reform. Relatedly, future studies could explore how positionality shapes adaptive capacity of NGOs as entities as well as the influence of some representatives due to personal networks, expertise, charisma, or credibility. While assemblage theory captures these dynamics within broader relational configurations, a stronger brokerage lens would place such forms of agency at the centre of analysis.

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Personal Declaration

I hereby declare that the material contained in this thesis is my own original work. Any quotation or paraphrase in this thesis from the published or unpublished work of another individual or institution has been duly acknowledged. I have not submitted this thesis, or any part of it, previously to any institution for assessment purposes.

In line with the recommendations on the use of generative artificial intelligence at UZH, I further declare that the generative AI tool ChatGPT for brainstorming and linguistic improvement like rephrasing. I assume full responsibility for the content of this thesis.

24.04.2026, Zurich

Severin Johnson



Appendix

Interview Guide

Specific questions to inquire about → topics of interest

- **Professional role in institutional development cooperation context of Switzerland**
 - What is/are your role(s) and what responsibilities do you have?
 - How does your organisation/department engage with development cooperation?
 - Do you engage in any other relevant activities or take up other positions on a personal and/or political level that are related to development cooperation issues?
- **General (Swiss) political landscape shifts**
 - Political power/representation of certain political parties in parliament
 - Potential changes in explicit or implicit missions or priorities of government agencies such as DEZA/SDC or others
 - Public opinions (as gauged in polls, etc.)
 - Other issues that affect political landscape (media, popular movements, digital transformations, etc.)
 - What changes have you taken notice of/become aware of/caught your attention? How have you perceived these changes?
 - How have they affected the field of development cooperation in your opinion? How do these changes become manifest? → in public debates, parliamentary funding decisions, official strategies and/or other ways?
 - How much of these shifts have been influenced by international political trends in the field? How much of the Swiss political shifts do you think can be attributed to the US/EU/UN/ other international political re-orientations and trends?
- **Shifting aid priorities and narratives**
 - How have aid project priorities and issues changed in the past 10-15 years? What do you put these changes down to?
 - What are the new focus points that are made? Are issues like e.g. migration control, political securitization or the prioritisation of national interests becoming more important?
 - How do these changes become reflected in official documents or policies?
- **Impacts on NGO strategies and operations**
 - To what extent have these political shifts affected the way your organization plans or implements projects? What specifically constrains or pressurises where and how you (personally and as an organisation) conduct your work?

- If you think there are tensions between humanitarian goals and political mandates, what are ways or mechanisms that you as an organization or as a professional individual use to deal with this?
- Are internal discussions or responses highly contested and diverging in your organization in response to these shifts or is a consensus regarding next steps usually reached easily? How much say do general staff have in comparison to higher-ups in deciding on adaptation measures/other steps?
- Is the integrity of your NGO's missions affected by the increasing funding insecurity? What are measures that potentially have been taken to combat this?
- What impacts have the political shifts had on how you frame projects to the public/donors/other audiences? What would you say is the main nature of these impacts? Are they perhaps linguistically, figuratively or otherwise differently talked about because of certain political shifts?
- **Personal impacts**
 - What are personal impacts like e.g. ethical tensions or moral conflicts that you may have encountered in your career? Do you think some of them are due to political shifts of the past 10-15 years?
 - How have you dealt with the challenges of aligning with, compromising to or resisting certain influences while simultaneously trying to remain true to your organisation's original commitments or missions?
- **State relations**
 - What does your organisation's relationship with state departments such as the SDC look like? How equal is this relationship? How much influence can you personally and as an organisation exert on these departments and their employees? Is it just one way (they dictate what you have to do) or are their avenues of mutual influence on each other's work?
 - How much leeway do you maintain in project design and priorities, partner selection or other issues? Has the autonomy of your projects been affected by the political developments? How has this manifested?
- **Reflections on the future**
 - Where do you think the future lies for Swiss development policy?
 - What are your main concerns or hopes?
 - What can your NGOs or others improve on to prepare for further political shifts (that might negatively impact the field of development cooperation)?

Overarching, general things/to keep in mind during interview

Before interview, it will be important to outline these points to my interview partner:

- **My aims of the interview:**
 - to use as data/insights/results/discussion material for my thesis, but not only as such. I also **hope to mutually benefit** each other, e.g. I might have insights or gain knowledge about certain topics or perspectives that are necessary to cover in my thesis while my interview partner may receive inputs to improve their NGO's strategy or handling of certain dilemmas, etc.
 - frame the interaction not as interview, but as a **learning conversation**. Ask about possible preparation they expect from me and definitely make sure to read up in detail about the NGO's activities and recent news.
 - Note that I may unintentionally embody or reproduce certain dominant narratives or repressive imaginations that do not reflect reality → I actively wish to be made aware of that!
- **Freedom, agency of interviewee:**
 - Crucial to **make interviewee feel assured and confident of my professionalism** regarding the data collection, so that **no doubts about data security** or similar concerns arise and possibly cloud or restrict possible insights for my work.
 - Before beginning of interview, non-recorded → go through measures:
 - **Anonymity and confidentiality:** names and references to other actors, names, places, projects, etc. that could potentially allow identification of sensitive information will not be disclosed and will be anonymised. Every emphasis will be placed on ensuring that this is achieved, to the general public as well as towards other actors within the field.
 - **Clear communication of boundaries and freedom:** to accommodate potential accidental crossings of personal boundaries or comfort zones, I will highlight that **participants may voice any concern or unwillingness about answering certain questions** or going into detail on certain topics. They are **free to stop the interview at any point** or refuse that their interview be used in any way for the thesis.