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FORUM SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

38TH EDITION

Poverty in Switzerland

Challenges and opportunities in the context of sustainable development

12 May 2026

Final Report

Around 180 people from the federal administration, cantons, cities and municipalities, academia and civil society gathered in Bern on 12 May 2026 for the 38th Forum Sustainable Development – marking the 25th anniversary of this conference series organised by the Federal Office for Spatial Development (ARE). Under the title «Poverty in Switzerland: Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of Sustainable Development», participants discussed how poverty can be understood, measured and tackled effectively. The topic is central to the 2030 Agenda: the UN's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 calls for ending poverty globally in all forms by 2030. Furthermore, the guiding principle "Leave no one behind" is regarded as an overarching maxim for a sustainable development that is inclusive of all. The reduction of poverty in Switzerland is defined as a goal in the 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy (2030 SDS). In November 2025, the Federal Social Insurance Office (FSIO) published the first monitoring report on poverty in Switzerland. For these and other reasons, the Forum Sustainable Development has taken up the topic of 'Poverty in Switzerland'. This report summarises the key findings of the conference.

AGENDA 2030

Anna Koukal,
Federal Social Insurance Office (FSIO)

Making poverty visible – monitoring as a political and social tool

Since 2025, Switzerland disposes of a national poverty monitoring, which for the first time provides a comprehensive, evidence-based picture of the poverty situation as well as poverty policy in the country. **Anna Koukal** from the **FSIO** presented the key findings: around 743,000 people in the permanent resident population are affected by income poverty (as of 2024). This corresponds to a poverty rate of around eight per cent, which has remained stable since 2017. However, if people at risk of poverty are included, almost one in six people in Switzerland can be considered to live in financially precarious circumstances. The reduction in poverty that Switzerland set as a target under the 2030 SDS has not yet been achieved.

The monitoring also shows that the social security system is effective but has gaps. Without social insurance and means-tested benefits, the poverty rate would be around 16 per cent; thanks to social transfers, it falls to just under six per cent. At the same time, an estimated 40 per cent of those eligible do not receive social benefits – for example, due to shame, lack of knowledge or administrative hurdles.

Tobias Fritschi & Adrian Gadient-Brügger,
Bern University of Applied Sciences
& Canton of Aargau

Tobias Fritschi from **Bern University of Applied Sciences** and **Adrian Gadient-Brügger** from **the Canton of Aargau** highlighted the added value offered by cantonal monitorings using register data: these enable more precise analyses for smaller population groups and geographical areas, as well as the observation of trends over time. Crucial to the success of such instruments are political legitimacy and cooperation between cantonal authorities, e.g. regarding data transfer.

Finally, **Thomas Vollmer** of the **FSIO** emphasised that monitoring is not an end in itself: it must provide a body of knowledge and insights that enable political action. The parliamentary mandate to the Federal Council to develop a national poverty strategy based on the monitoring is therefore coherent.

Poverty beyond the financial core – multidimensionality as a challenge

Poverty is more than a lack of financial resources: more than 80 per cent of people on low incomes face restrictions in at least one other dimension of their lifes, e.g. in housing, health or political participation. This multidimensional understanding of 'poverty as an accumulation of precarities' reflects the interplay between the various themes and goals of the 2030 Agenda – and ran as a common thread through the entire conference.

Daniel Dubas,
Delegate of the Federal Council for the 2030 Agenda & head of the Sustainable Development Section

Housing was described by several speakers as the most acute social issue in Switzerland. It is as well an area that exemplifies the potential conflict of objectives between ecological and social sustainability: investment-driven renovations and energetic redevelopments of properties are driving up rents and displacing low-income households. **Lea Wirz** from the **cantonal social welfare office of Basel-Landschaft** and **Tobias Fritschi** also pointed out that even the social welfare rent guidelines in many cantons no longer keep pace with actual market conditions – a structural gap that urgently needs to be closed. In the field of education, **Anna Koukal** highlighted the far-reaching impact of poverty: children from households receiving social assistance are three times less likely to have a post-compulsory education.

Andreas Lustenberger from **Caritas Switzerland** highlighted that the financial core of poverty leads to other dimensions being neglected: social participation, nutrition and health are often sacrificed first when the budget tightens – with long-term consequences for both the individual and society. **Eugen Brand** from **ATD Fourth World**, in turn, referred to the 'hidden dimensions' of poverty that rarely feature in common analyses: the creeping loss of agency and autonomy, the invisible suffering of body and mind, and the

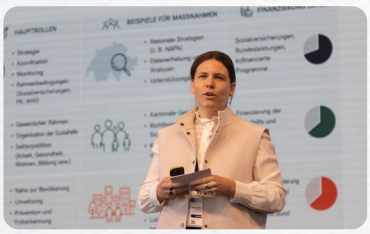
fact that society pays too little attention to the efforts taken by people living in poverty to improve their lives. Added to this is a fundamental cultural dimension: the widespread perception that poverty is self-inflicted reinforces stigmatisation, hinders access to services and must be actively combated.

Marie Amélie Dupraz-Ardiot & Julien Nicolet,
Canton of Fribourg

Responsibility across all levels – coordination as a key challenge

The multidimensional nature of poverty calls for a coordinated, cross-cutting policy that tackles various structural factors simultaneously. The approach of sustainable development, which links social, environmental and economic concerns, offers an opportunity to promote solutions that have a long-term impact across all dimensions.

The **Canton of Fribourg** demonstrated how cooperation in line with sustainable development can work at cantonal level: **Marie Amélie Dupraz-Ardiot** and **Julien Nicolet** described how the cantonal Office for Sustainable Development and the Social Welfare Office collaborate on initiatives with a shared budget and common goals. Two examples of collaboration were presented: a helpdesk for agricultural businesses that promotes mentoring and the early detection of poverty through a trained network of people with links to the agricultural sector, and the Integration Pool+, where specialists from job placement and social welfare work together to support people in their job search. Such initiatives are benefiting all involved parties, those affected as well as the relevant state actors. Their success relies on political will, a 'culture of transversality' within the administration, and a joint budget that transcends sectoral boundaries.



Manon Röthlisberger,
Swiss Association of Municipalities

However, a major challenge lies not only in horizontal collaboration in terms of content but also in vertical coordination across administrative levels. Municipalities are the first point of contact for the public and can respond quickly to needs. **Manon Röthlisberger** from the **Swiss Association of Municipalities** used concrete examples from all language regions to demonstrate how municipalities are taking action in the field of poverty prevention – from early childhood support services to educational projects for migrants. At the same time, without coordinated cantonal and national framework conditions, gaps remain that cannot be closed at municipal level alone.

At national level, the Federal Council's National Poverty Strategy, currently under development, represents therefore an important milestone. **Thomas Vollmer** underlined, however, that the real challenge lies in implementation: the strategy must quantify an overarching goal, involve all relevant stakeholders at federal, cantonal and municipal level, and establish policy coherence, which has been lacking to date.

Michael Zeier,
ATD Fourth World

Tackling poverty effectively – levers for change

Effectively overcoming poverty requires that people experiencing poverty are not merely the subject of discussion, but active participants. **Virginia Hauptlin** and **Michael Zeier** from **ATD Fourth World** advocated for participation on an equal footing: people living in poverty must be recognised as bearers of knowledge and involved, from the beginning, in the development of solutions as full actors of change. The method of participatory research, in which people experiencing poverty, experts and researchers work together as equals, offers a concrete model for this. With this regard, the newly established Council on Poverty Issues at federal level is a structural step in the right direction.

Overcoming barriers to access also requires innovation in service delivery. A few propositions of possible approaches were put forward: integrated desks that bundle various services; automatic eligibility checks that reduce the number of people not claiming benefits; and easily accessible digital support. **Andreas Lustenberger** reported on a multilingual chatbot pilot project in Central Switzerland that shows those affected, in their own language, what support services are available locally – an example of how technology can facilitate access to services when used in a targeted manner.

Marine Benli-Trichet,
Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau

Finally, **Marine Benli-Trichet**, an expert on just transition at the **Centre for Democracy Studies Aarau**, made it clear that ecological transition without explicit social compatibility will exacerbate inequality. A just transition can only succeed if it is recognised that the costs and benefits of the transition are unevenly distributed. There is also a need for a binding framework with practical measures, in the development of which citizens – particularly the most disadvantaged groups – are actively and fully involved so that their reality is taken into account.

Outlook: Overcoming poverty together

The findings of the 38th Forum Sustainable Development coalesce into a clear message: poverty in Switzerland manifests itself in diverse, interlinked dimensions – from income and housing through education and health to social participation. Robust, regular monitoring is essential for understanding this complex and multifaceted problem, and for developing coherent measures that do justice to all those affected. Implementing these measures requires long-term political will, coordination across all levels, the involvement of people with experience of poverty, and a genuine societal debate on the issue of poverty. Only in this way can the promise of the 2030 Agenda "Leave no one behind" be fulfilled in Switzerland.

Labs: Practice and innovation in dialogue

In the afternoon, eleven parallel Labs explored the topic in greater depth and provided a space for exchange between experts, researchers and those affected. The range of workshops reflected the multidimensionality of poverty: from the link between social and environmental sustainability, through issues of housing and energy-efficient renovations, to basic skills, early childhood and access to social benefits. Other Labs addressed the mobilisation of social investment, the hidden dimensions of poverty, concrete participatory formats and personal experiences of poverty.

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