Highlights of the Swiss labour market in international cooperation


Since 2010 cinfo, jointly with Büro BASS, has monitored the Swiss labour market in international cooperation (IC), providing an overview of the relevant features and observing its development over time. See separate sheet for more details on study design and methodology.

Market size and composition 2016

6'144 jobs in IC organisations with headquarters in Switzerland:

- 4'642 professionals without support functions and 1'502 employees in support functions.

Market dynamics 2014–2016

- 74% Humanitarian aid
- 26% Development cooperation

More jobs in humanitarian aid

The labour market expanded between 2014 and 2016, due to the growth in humanitarian aid (HA) with 800 new positions (professionals without support functions). The number of positions in development cooperation (DC) remained stable. As a result, humanitarian aid dominates the market even more.

... also in support functions

Support functions account for 24% of the market. Between 2014 and 2016, there was a similar job increase as for professionals without support functions.
Job demand and supply

Observations about job seekers

- 18% looked for entry-level positions.
- 65% looked for fixterm positions.
- 32% had 1 to 2 years’ IC experience.
- 23% had 3 to 5 years’ IC experience.
- 21% had at least 6 years’ IC experience.
- 24% had over 40 years old.

Most job seekers without work experience in international cooperation were 27-28 years old. 25% were over 40 years old and had work experience, albeit not in IC. While there is an increasing interest from lateral entrants to join IC, it is more difficult for them to meet the profile requirements of this labour market.

Precarious job market for professionals with IC experience

- The jobs portal cinfoPoste was used more by people with IC experience in 2016 than 2014. The proportion of job seekers with experience increased by 14% during the last 2 years, while the number of vacancies asking explicitly for more IC experience went down marginally.
- It seems that job seekers with a medium level of experience are in a precarious situation, as they do not find job opportunities to further develop the competencies required for a career in IC. On the other hand, organisations find it increasingly difficult to fill senior-level positions, as these profiles are getting more complex and based in increasingly risky contexts.
- The 14% decline in the number of job seekers with no IC experience cannot yet be explained. It needs to be seen whether there is a trend or not. If so, are young people less interested in joining IC or is it the result of IC being more difficult to get into?

Degrees and work experience

The proportion of job seekers with a master’s degree or higher increased between 2014 and 2016 to 80%. On the other hand, organisations require a master’s degree in their job advertisements less often than in 2014.

Still, 79% of large DC organisations require a master’s degree or above qualification. In the case of large HA organisations, 53% require a master’s degree and 40% an applied university degree.

However, both work-related experience and qualifications play an important role for a successful career in IC.
Less job seekers ready to go abroad?

In comparison to 2014, only 51% looked exclusively for non-support positions, which are usually abroad. The demand for support positions, which tend to be in headquarters, increased.

Are job seekers less interested in going abroad or don’t they have the right profile for specialist positions?

Source: Surveys of cinfoPoste users 2014–2016 (n=628)

Humanitarian aid – development cooperation: blurred boundaries

The separate sectors of HA and DC are moving closer together: HA organisations are integrating more aspects of DC, while DC organisations are increasingly engaged in fragile contexts.

This is reflected in job demand and supply. The proportion of job seekers in both areas has increased since 2014. At the same time, fewer employers explicitly require experience in HA or DC (2011: 51%, 2016: 33%).

Humanitarian aid: mismatch between supply and demand

Job seekers looking for positions in HA

Most entry jobs in development cooperation

It is more difficult to enter HA without experience than DC. Internships are found more in small DC and junior positions in large DC organisations. HA looks more for senior candidates with leadership and strategic experience.

Job seekers’ interest for work in HA grew steadily between 2014 and 2016. The growth was driven by people with no IC experience. This trend isn’t reflected in the number of current HA job vacancies, where only a few junior positions for young graduates are available.

Source: Surveys of cinfoPoste users 2014–2016 (n=630)

Source: Survey of Job ads cinfoPoste wewa 2016 (n=890)
Higher education

Course offers: saturated but stable

The number of graduate and postgraduate courses relevant to a career in international cooperation remained stable between 2014 and 2016. The number of students also remained stable.

Another „Röstigraben“ at the postgraduate level

IC-specific postgraduate study (PGS) programmes at MAS/DAS level are concentrated in Geneva (12), Lugano (3), Zurich (5) and Basel (2).

In 2015, 309 people (78%) studied in Geneva and Lugano, while 85 people studied in Zurich and Basel (22%).

The profile of postgraduate students enrolling in IC-related courses is increasingly international. In Geneva and Lugano, 68% were from countries outside Switzerland and the EU. This contrasts with Zurich and Basel, where only 25% were neither from Switzerland nor from the EU.

Last but not least...

Persistent gender inequality

In 2016 the proportion of women studying remained higher than men, at 60%. More than 60% of job seekers and applicants for junior positions were women.

However, women represented only 42% of full-time professionals. Women tend to work in small organisations where they find opportunities to work part-time and in Switzerland. In the case of large organisations, most jobs (without support functions) are abroad (88% in HA, 60% in DC) and full-time (98% in HA, 80% in DC).

IC is getting more international

With 50% Swiss, DC is considerably less international than HA, with 20% Swiss. In 2016 the proportion of foreign professionals in DC NGOs increased from 46% to 50%. HA figures did not show further internationalisation. Swiss professionals also benefitted from the expansion of ICRC and other HA organisations. Larger organisations are more international, with 80% non-Swiss in large HA, 60% in large DC, 34% in small DC.

What are the reasons and potential consequences of the continuous decline of Swiss in DC and HA?
The Swiss labour market in international cooperation (IC)

Study design and methodology

Monitoring of the Swiss labour market in IC is based on the following surveys:

- Annual survey of a selection of relevant training institutions at the tertiary level (bachelor’s / master’s degree) and in the area of further education (MAS, DAS, PGS) and student enrolments.
- Biennial online survey of cinfoPoste users and job seekers in the IC labour market.
- Biennial online survey of Swiss IC employers, including Swiss NGOs and companies, international NGOs based in Switzerland and the ICRC. Multilateral organisations such as UNDP and OECD are not included.
- Continuous coding of job postings on cinfoPoste. Added were web advertisements posted by organisations since 2015.

Definition of terms and structure of monitoring

HA and DC sectors: IC comprises two relatively strictly segmented sectors, the first being humanitarian aid (HA) and the second development cooperation (DC). The areas of economic cooperation, peace promotion and the promotion of human rights are included, for the purposes of monitoring, under DC.

Non-support and support functions: Monitoring focuses on non-support functions whose tasks fall within the core work of IC and which require relevant, specific IC training and experience. For pure support functions such as fundraising, HR and finance, only data on the number of positions is collected.

Local staff / volunteers: The data does not apply to local staff (‘nationals’) or to unpaid volunteers.

Lateral entrants: ‘New entrants’ refers to people who apply for positions in IC directly from their first higher education. Lateral entrants have professional experience and change to IC after a first professional phase.

For more information on design and methodology (in the previous full report, p. 6): www.bit.ly/2Fv0N3m