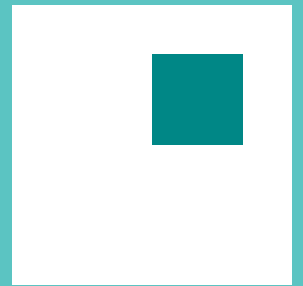


Young people's interest in a career in international cooperation



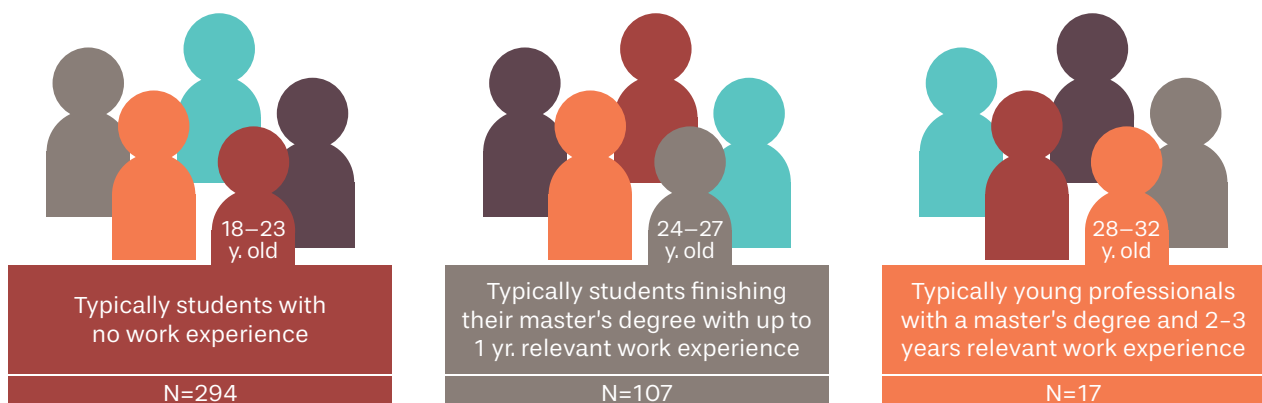
1. Why a study on young people?

The interest of young people in a career in international cooperation (IC) is essential to ensuring the sector's professional regeneration, an issue of great relevance to both cinfo and employers in this field. cinfo, a centre of excellence in the field of international cooperation, is tasked with informing and guiding individuals interested in a career in this sector. It also manages recruitment for young people programmes, for example with United Nations Organisations and multilateral development banks.

The issue is multi-faceted. What attracts young people to the sector? Are they interested in working abroad, and under what conditions? Are their skills sufficient and what are the potential disincentives to a career in this field? The following report presents the main findings and recommendations of a study undertaken by cinfo, in collaboration with HAFL (Bern University of Applied Sciences) in 2020.

Definition of young people

For this study, young people are defined as people younger than 33, with between 0 and 3 years' professional experience relevant to the sector. This group could be further divided into three categories:



Note: The majority of survey respondents fell into the first age category, with few in the third. Thus, the results are more representative of students with little or no work experience.



The Swiss Centre of Competence
for International Cooperation

Job portal & recruitment
HR marketing
HR & career development
Networking
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On behalf of the Swiss Confederation and in
collaboration with the main organisations in the sector.

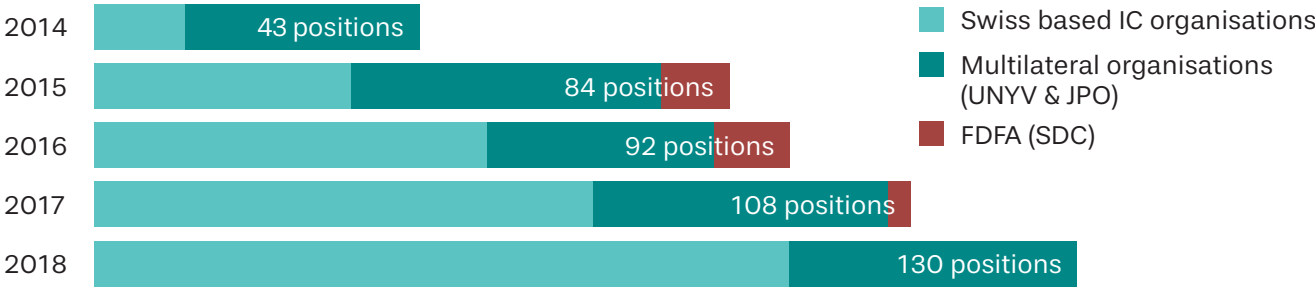
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2. How have job opportunities evolved?

Internships and junior positions have evolved in a number of areas in recent years, according to the data collected from organisations based in Switzerland, the Swiss Confederation and multilateral organisations.

Positions for young people in the sector

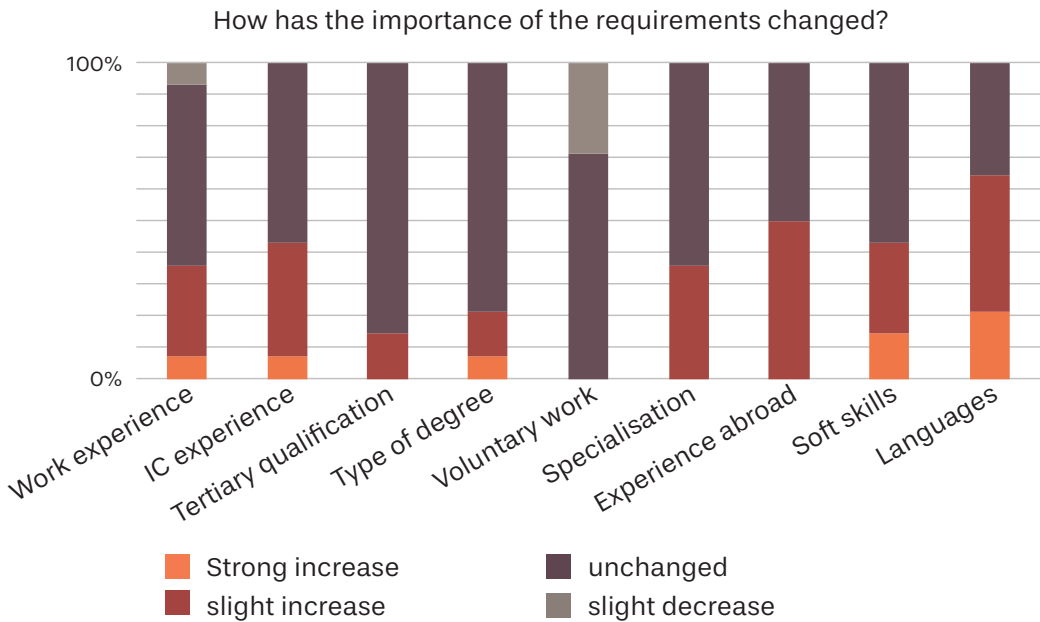
The following graph shows the 5 years' evolution of positions for young graduates provided by 16 IC organisations (Swiss-based or state employers), the SDC/FDFA and SECO funded UN Youth Volunteer (UNYV) and Junior Professional Officer (JPO) positions in multilateral organisations and the FDFA Career 'International Cooperation'.



Quality of applications

The Swiss-based organisations experienced no difficulty in recruiting for vacancies designated for young graduates. In fact, the average number of applications per position is increasing and they are considered to be of a high standard.

In contrast, recruiting for junior positions in multilateral organisations is more complicated, as cinfo has observed in recruiting for UN Youth Volunteers and Junior Professional Officers positions at the United Nations and development banks. Applicants are discouraged by the complex job advertisements, with their high expectations, specific expertise required and insistence on the detailed job requirements being met. Further, these positions seem to suffer from a lack of visibility and possibly a controversial or a lack of reputation regarding certain UN organisations.



Required skills

Have employers' expectations towards candidates changed? There is a clear trend towards an increase in the importance of languages among the competences required. Soft skills, such as social and team competences, are also crucial for this type of work. The requirement for experience abroad and specific experience in international cooperation is also increasing.

Limited budget for junior positions

According to the surveyed organisations, it is not difficult to find motivated, qualified young people to fill positions. The difficulty lies in the budget restrictions to hire them on a long-term basis. Several employers specified that they did not encourage the practice of unpaid internships, which limited their ability to create junior positions. Long term perspectives have to be found particularly for Category 3 (Young professionals with a master's degree and 2-3 years of relevant work experience).

"It is necessary to promote young people to prevent a lack of skilled professionals in the future."

3. What motivates young people?

Criteria for job attractiveness

In order to understand young people's career choices, it is important to understand their priorities in terms of job criteria.

Respondents reported that their first priority is work-life balance, including related issues such as flexible work arrangements and career options for partners. Organisational issues, such as leadership style, the type of hierarchy and organisational culture also emerge as decisive criteria. In third position is physical and financial security.

The statistics highlight differences according to respondents' age and gender: older respondents place more importance on organisational culture, leadership style and the flexible work model; physical safety is more important to women.



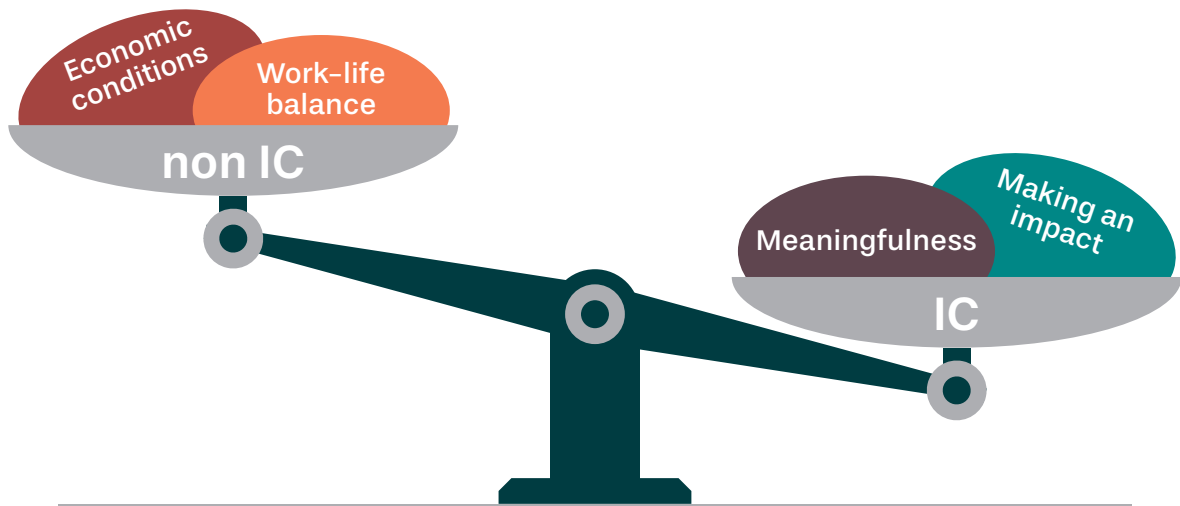
Why international cooperation?

What motivates young people to work in this field? Most respondents answered that they wanted to have a meaningful job and to participate in building a better world. Interestingly, the opportunity to live and work abroad is of only moderate motivation.



Career drivers

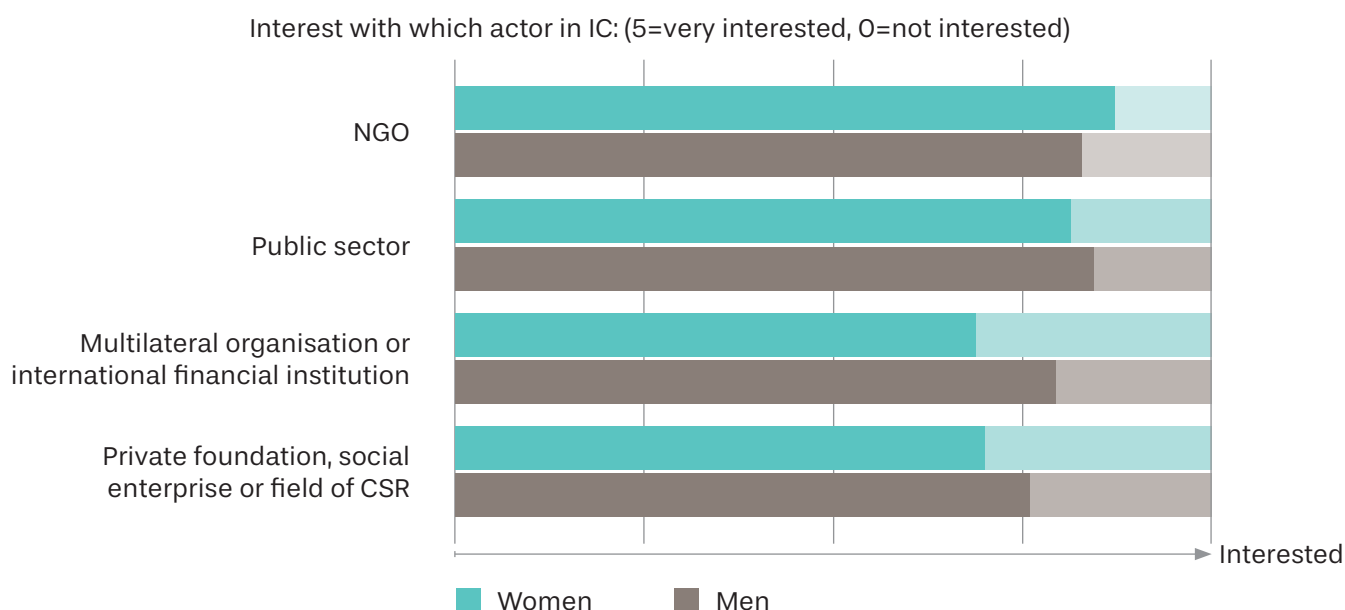
Which factors influencing individual career choice are perceived by the respondents to favour international cooperation (IC), and which are seen as more advantageous in another sector?



Young people are driven towards international cooperation by the aspects of “mission”, but are held back by the more practical aspects of economic conditions and balancing professional and private life.

Which employer is more attractive?

Within international cooperation, the majority of respondents – especially women – prefer to work for an NGO, followed by the Confederation and then multilateral organisations such as the UN. Men show slightly more interest in the latter. This reflects the observation mentioned earlier that NGOs have no shortage of applicants, while positions are more challenging to fill in multilateral organisations.



4. What discourages young people from entering the sector?

Working and living conditions

Respondents stated that the most important element in a job's appeal is the issue of work-life balance, followed by suitable career options for partners (framework conditions for dual careers).

Young people wanting to get into international cooperation face many requirements: a master's degree, previous work experience, etc. The respondents highlighted that by the time they are able to meet all these requirements, they are entering the phase of life where they feel the need to "settle down"; decisions regarding family and place of residence become more pressing as they get older.

Economic and job insecurity are further disincentives that emerge from the survey, in particular the fact that a large proportion of jobs are short-term, which reduces the professional perspectives. In addition, many internships are underpaid.

"Long runway to a decent position"
"Internship salary too low to live on"
"Weak pension plan, social security"

Living in an unstable region does not appeal to everyone and emerged as a particularly strong disincentive among those young people who stated they are not interested in this sector. Qualitative exchanges with students have shown that they are often not informed about the support offered by employers when working in fragile contexts (Is there a pre-departure training? What are the real dangers for expats? What happens if a conflict situation evolves?).

Doubts about the impact of international cooperation

Another striking finding is that some young people, especially those who had considered a career in international cooperation before deciding against it, reported doubts about its real impact, especially in the long term. This is particularly evident in comments like the following:

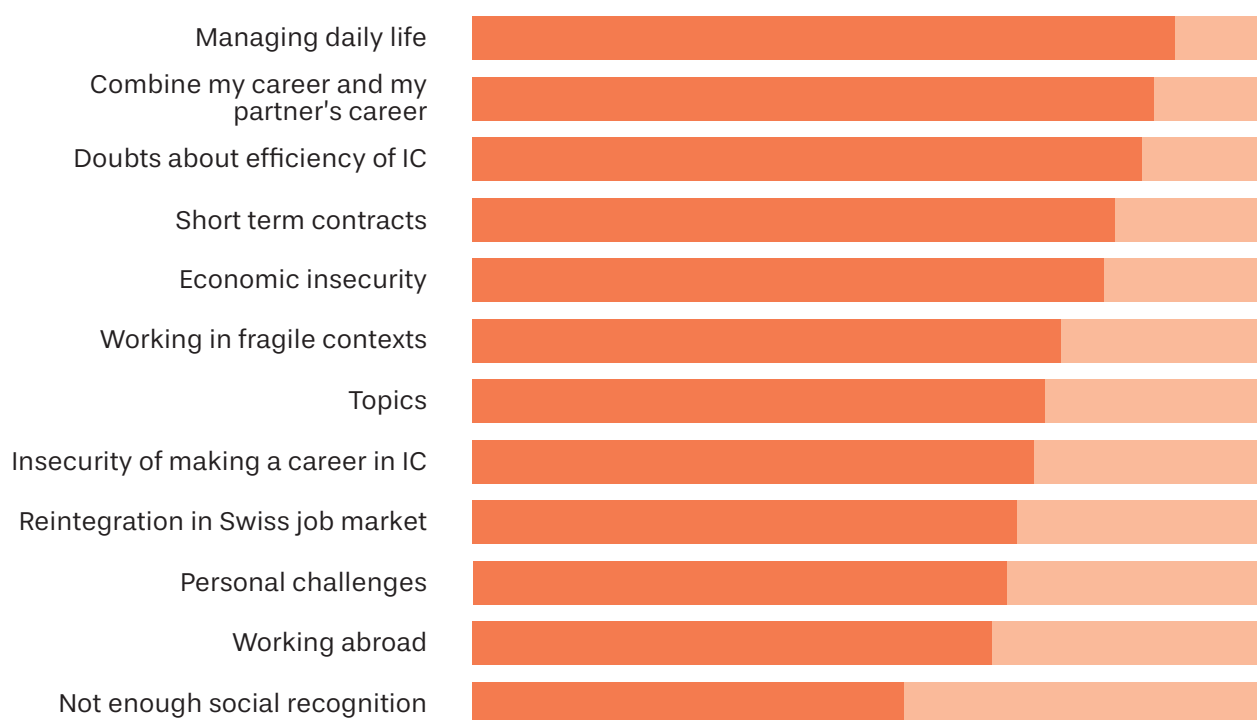
"I read that helping in a poor country for a short time often doesn't even help"

Others regret what they consider to be a very Euro-centric approach to cooperation:

"Neo-colonial touch of development cooperation"

These comments may reflect a confusion between voluntary tourism and the professional sector of cooperation. It is also possible that current significant social movements (Me-too, Black Lives Matter, the sector's abuse scandals, the ever-evolving understanding of the impact of colonialism) are also influencing young people's opinions about the sector.

Which aspects do you consider to be a personal disincentive to work in IC?



Difficult to find a way in

Whether cliché or fact, several comments were made about the “elitist” aspect of the sector. According to some respondents, entry-level positions often require several internships that are either unpaid or significantly underpaid. In addition, certain expectations (e.g. the requirement for new graduates to have experience abroad) can only be met by young people whose parents are already working in international cooperation or are able to finance studies and unpaid internships abroad. According to these comments, privileged individuals have a better chance of getting into this sector.

“You need an impossibly good CV”

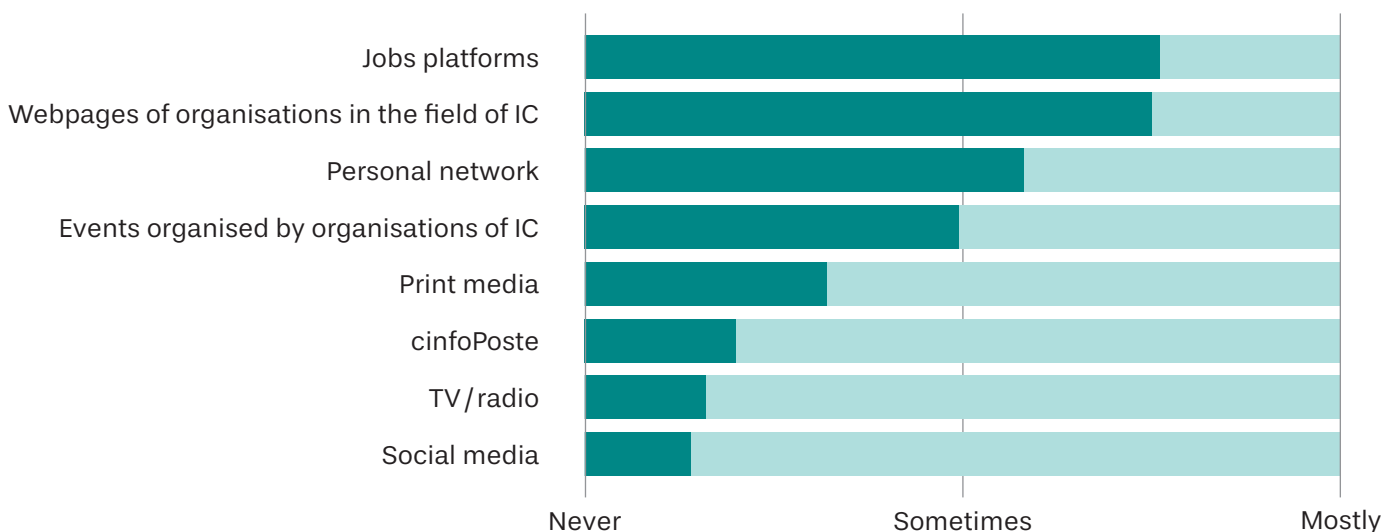
“You need to have personal contacts to get in – a normal university course doesn't seem to be enough”

5. Where do young people search for an entry-level job?

The surveyed employers' prefer to advertise vacancies on their own websites, on cinfoPoste and through personal networks. This is mirrored in young people's preferences for large employment platforms, organisations' websites and their personal networks when job hunting. University job platforms were also cited in comments as another channel to find jobs. It is interesting to note that social networks are not often used.

Younger respondents are more likely than older respondents to send unsolicited applications. Respondents with lower levels of education are more likely to agree with the statement “I'm not sure how to proceed”. This is an interesting result for career and orientation centres such as cinfo, which are able to inform job seekers on the best way to proceed.

Channels used for job search



6. General recommendations

This study has highlighted certain discrepancies in the perception of international cooperation between young graduates and employers. At this stage, the following recommendations are of a general nature and aim to overcome the gap between the two. These recommendations are presented more specifically in a longer document with a specific focus on the organisations concerned.

Search for realistic flexible working arrangements. The study revealed the wishes of young people, such as work-life balance, flexible working arrangements and the possibility of a dual career. These wishes are at odds with the needs of organisations which recruit flexible employees willing to work in fragile contexts. Creative ways of working, such as flexible arrangements, should be developed in contexts where such working modalities are realistic. This will increase job satisfaction and substantially reduce turnover.

Offer longer term opportunities. One of the problems facing young people is the lack of job opportunities to gain further field experience following the first 1-3 years. Today, locals in beneficiary countries are doing jobs previously undertaken by international staff. This development has led to a substantial decrease in field opportunities for young people. At the same time, (mainly) NGOs have little or no funds to invest further in junior positions. As a result, organisations cannot offer follow-up positions within their organisation. The sector needs more positions for experienced young talent. One solution could be to encourage talent promotion in SDC mandates.

Highlight each employer's visions, goals and specificities. Young people know little about the differences between employers. cinfo, in collaboration with education institutions and career centres, could provide more information on the differences between employers, their organisational structures and management styles, as well as potential career paths and the diverse working conditions of each organisation, or types of organisation.

Show the impact of the projects. Some comments reflect a negative perception of international cooperation, which the sector should address by better demonstrating the impact of their projects. In this respect, it may be more effective to communicate on the long-term impact of projects rather than to show individual success stories.

Improve communication. Employers communicate often, but not always through the right channels or in an appropriate form. It is not easy for young job seekers to find the right information, and they often get discouraged. Improved communication would make it easier for them to take the first steps in their careers.

7. Methodology

Employers' survey

The employer survey was conducted directly by cinfo. 16 organisations (Swiss-based or state employers) responded¹. As cinfo is responsible for recruitment for the Swiss-funded UNYV and JPO positions in multilateral organisations (www.cinfo.ch/swiss-to-mo), the data for the analysis of multilateral organisations was collected internally. Basic data was also collected on the FDFA's International Cooperation Career programme (the FDFA's diplomatic career is not included here).

In this questionnaire, "young professional positions" were defined as internships, positions or programmes explicitly intended for young people with little experience, containing an aspect of training.

Students' survey

This questionnaire was produced by the School of Agricultural, Forest and Food Sciences, HAFL (Bern University of Applied Sciences). 530 students participated in the survey, from various fields of study and from several Swiss higher education institutions that were geographically well-distributed.

The sample is composed of individuals with less than 3 years' work experience, and aged between 18 and 31, with an average age of 23. A majority of the respondents were female (63%). Most of the respondents are studying at bachelor or master level. The statistical evaluations are sufficiently representative with good significance values.

Following the written survey, around twenty participants from both surveys were invited to a workshop where students and employers were able to compare their perspectives, and the findings were further explored and verified. The recommendations are mainly based on the results of this workshop.

¹ The following organisations participated in the survey: Amnesty International, Caritas, Comundo, Eper, Helvetas, Interteam, Médecins sans Frontières, Pestalozzi Children's Foundation, Save the Children, SDC (Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit), SECO (Economic Cooperation and Development), Solidarmed, Swissaid, Swisscontact, Swiss Red Cross, Terre des hommes.