

HEKS/EPER Thematic Factsheet 2024 & Report 2023



Development Politics

HEKS/EPER's strategy, expertise and achievements on development policy work in the areas of Climate Justice, Right to Seeds for Agroecology, Business and Human Rights, Land Grabbing and the Right to Land

Zürich/Bern/Lausanne, May 2024

Pictures. Top left: inauguration of the international conference on Just Transition in the Palm Oil Industry. Top right: local and national authorities visiting the regional seed fair in Cameroon. Bottom left: Indonesian plaintiff Asmania speaking at Swiss Women's Strike in Zurich. Bottom right: Launch of HEKS/EPER campaign carbon offsetting and its impact on land rights.

Why Development Politics Matters

HEKS/EPER understands development politics as its commitment to influence political processes, institutions and decisions in Switzerland that are relevant to the people in countries with people in economic, social, or humanitarian needs and have a direct or indirect effect on them. Being a small but one of the economically most prosperous countries in the world, Switzerland is a global player in various areas that significantly influence international political and economic structural conditions.

With its low-tax policy, a globally very high number of investment protection treaties and other factors, Switzerland is a preferred location for numerous international companies; it is also a hub for commodity trading as well for hard (minerals, metals, and fossil energy sources) as for soft commodities (soy, wheat, coffee, cocoa, palm oil etc.). How these companies do their business and produce in fragile countries is decided primarily in the corporate headquarters in Switzerland. In addition, the companies and their lobby organisations strongly influence the shaping of political and legal frameworks and measures, both in Switzerland and at the international level (e.g., UN bodies), to protect their economic interests as best as possible. This is also the case, among others, in climate policy, the respect of human rights, communities' rights to natural resources, the design of international agricultural and food systems, trade and the protection of intellectual property rights.

As a well-known and relatively important Swiss-based and internationally active organisation, HEKS, therefore, has the opportunity as well as the responsibility to influence these political processes and actors to strengthen the rights of people in the Global South. With its development policy activities, HEKS/EPER holds certain Swiss actors accountable and takes a stand in the Swiss public and political debate. Through information and awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy and lobbying, HEKS/EPER thus, on the one hand, influences the narratives in these policy fields and, on the other hand, aims to have a direct political impact.

The development policy work of HEKS/EPER is based on joint research and done in direct and close collaboration with partner organisations and networks in the Global South. While engaging in campaigning and lobbying work in Switzerland and internationally, the support for local, national, and international struggles and advocacy of local communities, organisations and networks is an equally important part of our work.

HEKS/EPER has recently developed **three thematic programmes** on **Climate Justice: the Right to Seeds for Agroecology and the Right to Food**, and **Land Grabbing and the Right to Land**. These programmes – all three highly interlinked with and mutually reinforcing each other – are based on the objectives of the HEKS/EPER institutional strategy 2023-2028 and provide the framework for its development policy work.

This engagement complements the programmes and projects HEKS/EPER supports and/or implements through its country programmes, including national or regional advocacy in these countries.

Global Context

Climate Change

Climate and environmental justice mean that every human being has the same basic right to a safe, clean and healthy environment. Climate justice, therefore, implies not only that humanity is obliged to reduce emissions drastically and swiftly to zero, but also to share the burden in a just manner. Given the North's primary responsibility for climate change (including states and businesses), its historic emission debt, as well as its economic capacity, this means mitigating its emissions, (financially) supporting poorer countries in low-emission development, in adapting to the consequences of climate change, and in dealing with losses and damages.

World leaders at the Paris UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) reached a breakthrough in December 2015: the historic Paris Agreement. The Agreement is a legally binding international treaty. It entered into force on 4 November 2016. Today, 194 Parties (193 States plus the European Union and Switzerland) have joined the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement is also the basis for Switzerland regarding emissions reductions and climate finance.

Seeds for Agroecology and Food Insecurity

The failures of industrial agriculture and food systems are becoming increasingly pronounced and evident, creating drastic negative impacts on human health, nature, and the climate and transgressing numerous human rights, including the right to food and peasants' right to seeds as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Peasants Rights UNDROP. Seed diversity, developed and preserved by peasants within farm-based seed systems, is fundamental to transforming agroecological, democratic and just food systems. Under the pretext of modernising the seed sector and protecting breeders' intellectual property, countries of the global South are pushed to enact strict plant variety protection laws (according to UPOV standards). They guarantee seed breeders – often international agricultural corporations - monopoly rights over their seeds. On the other hand, farmers are no longer allowed to exchange or sell seeds they have obtained from such protected varieties. Switzerland is a key player in disseminating and enforcing intellectual property rights (IPR) on seeds (UPOV, patents). As a member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), Switzerland has been forcing developing countries to adopt plant variety protection laws in line with UPOV 91 through free trade agreements.

Land Grabbing and for the Right to Land

Land grabbing, that is, the loss of control over land due to the large-scale acquisition or long-term lease of land through companies, individuals, or investors (be it private or public), remains a significant problem for smallholder peasants, forest dwellers, and herders in many parts of the world and leads to the violation of Human Rights including the Right to Food. It is especially those already most marginalised and discriminated against in societies that are affected by land grabbing. Land grabbing often occurs where overlying and sometimes contradicting layers of land rights exist. However, the main driver of land grabbing is the global search for profitable investments, coupled with food price rises and the rise of renewable energy prices, making large-scale agriculture so interesting. While land grabbing has been happening for centuries, the recent wave of land grabs started after 2008 when the food and financial crises caused a rush to acquire control over the world's farmland.

A more recent development with the inherent risk of exacerbating land grabbing is the focus of the latest climate negotiations and related corporate strategies on offsetting CO2 emissions through land-based carbon sinks in the Global South instead of pursuing strategies of first and foremost decarbonising. While there are many good and promising methods to increase carbon in the soil and enable climate change adaptation, it is clear that climate change mitigation cannot rely on large-scale carbon sinks due to the vast amounts of land that this would require.

Business and Human Rights

Corporate Power: Multinational companies are continuing to grow on a global scale, increasing the power imbalance among producers, affected communities and companies, e.g., enormous revenues and benefits of extractive companies due to the Ukraine war/energy crisis. Supply chains are often not transparent in various sectors, allowing human rights violations and environmental destruction.

The EU legislation process for EU directives, such as corporate sustainability reporting, corporate sustainability due diligence, and environmental crimes, is progressing. At the UN level, the negotiations for a binding treaty on Business and Human Rights are ongoing and gaining momentum.

Litigation: More and more legal cases emerge globally addressing corporate accountability for human rights violations and climate change.

How HEKS/EPER Responds – the Strategy

Right to Seeds for Agroecology and the Right to Food

HEKS/EPER has decided to focus specifically on peasants' right to seed and farm-based seed systems as an effective means to the transformation towards agroecological and just food systems for the following reasons:

- Without local seed diversity, this transformation needed to realise the right to food cannot be achieved. Farmers, especially women, are the first and most important creators and guardians of seeds and seed diversity. To fulfil these roles, farmers need access to and control over seeds. In other words, farmers' rights to seeds need to be respected, protected, and fulfilled.
- Switzerland plays an important role in pushing for intellectual property rights on seeds worldwide that jeopardise farmers' right to seeds. Achieving a change of this policy will, therefore, have an important impact on farm-based seed systems and seed diversity, contributing to an agroecological transformation of food systems and the realisation of the right to food.
- As a Swiss-based but internationally present and active organisation, HEKS/EPER is well-situated to advocate and lobby Swiss institutions and actors towards such a change.

Business and Human Rights

HEKS/EPER supports the European Coalition for Corporate Justice and actively supports the Swiss Coalition for Corporate Justice to call for mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence in Switzerland, the European Union and at the UN level. HESK further monitors the development of the UN binding treaty on business and human rights and participates in the UN Forum for Business and Human Rights.

HEKS/EPER regularly publishes reports on human rights violations or environmental destruction when economic actors are involved, specifically with a link to Switzerland, contacts the relevant actors and calls them to take responsibility. To influence ongoing political and public debates in the thematic areas, HEKS/EPER analyses the developments in Switzerland and the countries of our partner organisations and engages in forums, conferences, and academic discussions when in line with the goals of its political strategy.

Against Land Grabbing and for the Right to Land

HEKS/EPER engages in research, advocacy and lobbying on cases where Swiss actors (companies/finance institutions) or policies (land-based CO₂ offsetting; trade deals) are involved in or leading to land grabbing to hold these actors accountable or change the respective policies. In the past years, HEKS/EPER has identified two Swiss agro-business companies, namely Socfin and Addax Bioenergy, responsible for land grabbing in West African and Asian countries. In 2023, HEKS/EPER started to work on a new case of land grabbing for carbon credits in Sierra Leone. So far, voluntary guidelines have not been proven to protect communities from land grabbing effectively. Therefore, the most important regulation in Switzerland to achieve this goal is an obligatory human rights due diligence law such as lobbied for by the coalition for responsible business (Koalition für Konzernverantwortung). The land grab cases reported on contribute to the lobby and advocacy of the coalition where HEKS/EPER is a founding and active member.

Furthermore, specific trade agreements with countries of the global South (i.e. the EFTA-Indonesia or EFTA-Mercosur agreement) or private regulations such as RSPO that potentially threaten communities'

right to land are addressed. A special focus of our work in this area is research and campaigning for climate policies that do not harm people's right to land or human rights. The work on this relatively new trend aims at informing especially the climate movement, media decision-makers and the public at large.

HEKS/EPER supports the affected communities in their efforts on the ground, e.g., through legal advice, but also strengthens local organisation and mobilisation, as well as national and regional networking. Special attention and support are given to protecting land rights defenders. In the search for alternatives to the non-sustainable model of industrial plantations, an approach of just transition in the palm oil sector is developed.

Fundamental to HEKS/EPER's advocacy and campaign work is the solid evidence provided by the experience and reports of partner organisations, the alliances and networks that HEKS/EPER supports and participates in, and in-house research and analysis.

Climate Justice

To contribute to the necessary change for more climate justice, HEKS/EPER has decided to focus specifically on projects targeted at the consequent implementation of the Paris Agreement's 1.5-degree target and the just compensation of Loss and Damage.

The Paris Agreement's 1.5-degree target (see chapter context above) forms the basis of our advocacy work.

A broader societal transformation is required for climate justice and to stay within the planetary boundaries. HEKS/EPER's thematic program includes campaigns and projects primarily targeted at the broad public. However, for the consequent implementation of the Paris Agreement and just compensation of Loss and Damage, HEKS/EPER's projects and advocacy work specifically address key players, such as the Swiss government and businesses with particularly high CO₂ emissions (Carbon Majors). This is because implementing climate mitigation policies and actions to limit global warming to 1.5°C, adequate funds for climate finance, as agreed in the Paris Agreement and establishing a fund for climate-induced losses and damages are lagging behind. As a Swiss-based organisation with projects worldwide, HEKS/EPER is well situated and has the necessary know-how and the relevant networks to lobby and advocate for this change.

Promising Practices Worldwide

Climate Litigation *Asmania et al. v. Holcim*

HEKS/EPER supports a climate litigation launched by four Indonesian individuals, named Asmania, Arif, Bobby and Edi, against the Swiss-based cement group Holcim. The four plaintiffs live on Pari Island, a small island in Indonesia that threatened to be submerged by rising sea levels in the coming years due to the adverse effects of climate change. The existence and livelihoods of the people on Pari island are already threatened today by the reoccurring extreme floods that submerge and damage their houses, water wells and touristic infrastructure. This is why they are taking Holcim to a Swiss civil court since the cement manufacturer excessively contributed to global CO₂ emissions over decades, bearing substantial responsibility in the climate crisis and for the damages and losses they suffered and continue to suffer. Holcim is among the 50 biggest emitters of CO₂ worldwide and has contributed 0.42% of all global industrial CO₂ emissions since 1750. Every year, today Holcim still emits twice the amount as all of Switzerland and is not doing enough to cut its emissions in the future. In their complaint, the four

Indonesians are asking Holcim to drastically reduce its CO₂ emissions, to contribute to compensation for their damages, and to adaptation measures according to its share of responsibility for the global industrial CO₂ emissions (0.42%).



The Indonesian Island of Pari – threatened to be submerged by the rising sea level.

The case can already be labelled a success in terms of public outreach. Since being launched in July 2022, it has gained much public attention as over 300 media outlets covered the story of Asmania, Arif, Edi and Bobby. Among many were articles in [the Financial Times](#), [the NZZ](#), [the Guardian](#) or [Al Jazeera](#). In November the plaintiffs had a first success: the Court granted them legal aid. It means that the State will cover their lawyer's and court costs. The proceedings in court are expected to go on for a few years. The case *Asmania et al. v. Holcim HEKS/EPER* supports strategic litigation, meaning that it backs the case to

engender broader changes within society in general and jurisprudence in particular. The case raises the issue of business responsibility in climate change and asks whether individual companies can continue to contribute to the climate crisis to a large extent without being held liable for it.

The case is underpinned by basic legal concepts of Swiss law that are applied to the context of climate change. Next to supporting the legal proceedings in this case, including a critical analysis of Holcim's climate targets, HEKS/EPER engages in advocacy and campaigning work to raise public awareness on business responsibility in the climate crisis and the global issue of loss and damage and climate (in)justice.

HEKS/EPER works with partners in Indonesia (WALHI-Friends of the Earth Indonesia) and Germany (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, ECCHR). More information on the case may be found here: www.callforclimatejustice.org

Controversial Rubber Plantations in Liberia – Impacts of a Long-Term Commitment

In 2019, HEKS/EPER, in collaboration with the Liberian organisation Green Advocates, published a report on human rights violations surrounding rubber plantations in Liberia. The Luxembourgian corporation Socfin runs the plantations and trades all the rubber via its Swiss subsidiary. Many inhabitants of villages in the vicinity of the plantation were inadequately informed about the expansion of the plantations, did not agree to it and were sometimes forcibly evicted from their land. In addition, there was repeated violence and threats on the plantations, particularly against women and human rights defenders.

As one immediate result of this report, Green Advocates supported local people in filing a complaint with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) of the World Bank Group, which financed the plantation. The IFC's internal ombudsman's office conducted its investigations on-site, which confirmed the complaints of the affected Liberian villages on several occasions. The support of HEKS/EPER allows a continuous engagement of the complainants with the IFC to ensure this complaint is heard and translates into concrete support.

Additionally, with the help of Green Advocates, 22 communities have filed a lawsuit against the state of Liberia, which granted the land as a concession to plantation companies in 1959, even though people were living there. Questions on land rights and justice go back a long way, and so today, the issue at stake is who had the land rights to the disputed plantation land when the concession was awarded. The court case

is continuing, but for the plaintiffs, it means hope that a court looks into their customary rights to the lands of their ancestors.

At the same time, the case has had an impact in Switzerland, when the Swiss Association for Responsible Investments, representing some of Switzerland's largest pension funds, placed French logistics giant Bolloré on a blacklist. Bolloré holds 39% of shares in Socfin and failed to act to resolve accusations of land-grabbing, environmental damage, and complicity in human rights violations on oil palm and rubber plantations operated by Socfin.

These developments show how continuous and joint engagement in complex land rights issues can support local struggles concretely and raise awareness on different levels.



Green advocates with local communities' representatives.

West- and Central African Regional Seed Fairs in Cameroun

In 2023 and 2024, HEKS/EPER sponsored again the regional seed fair in Cameroun. The FOSPAC 4 (Foire des Semences Paysanne du Cameroun) was the fourth seed faire organised by HEKS/EPER local partner organisation RADD, which started as the first civil society organisation in the country engaging in the issue of conserving and promoting peasant seeds. Over the years the seed fair has grown from a national to a regional scale, providing participants opportunities to exchange high-quality and rare varieties of farm-saved seeds and rich traditional knowledge on food. More than 300 farmers from ten countries in West and Central Africa displayed and exchanged over 250 seed varieties, over a dozen rare and original. In addition to farmers, the event attracted Cameroonian seed research institutes, government's agricultural agencies and various national food producers, including processors and agroecological input suppliers. By appealing to, mobilising and bringing together various national and regional actors of the food system, the seed fare plays an important role in promoting food sovereignty and implementing the right to food.



Regional seeds fairs in Cameroun.

The seed fair is, in effect, a culmination of the year-long intensive work that RADD has done to improve the capacities of farmers to select, use and save high-quality and endangered varieties of traditional seeds. RADD has supported these communities in setting up and resourcing several communal Seed Centres, which have been instrumental not only in rediscovering and saving lost seed varieties but also as platforms for training and exchange of experience among members on identifying, selecting, planting, and saving seeds. These structures also allow farmers to conduct their control of seed qualities, including those they brought to the FOSPAC 4.

Parallel to that, RADD has sensitised, educated, and alerted farmers on existing and emerging seed rules and regulations. Hence, farmers came to the FOSPAC 4 with a basic knowledge of their rights and the risks to it from rules and regulations at regional and international levels. In this regard, the participation at the FOSPAC 4 by members of COFERSA, HEKS/EPER's partner from Mali, was particularly effective in presenting complex international and national seed laws and regulations in plain language that fellow

farmers could easily understand. It is to be recalled that HEKS/EPER has been supporting its partner organisations, such as COFERSA, to regularly attend international discussions and negotiations, such as the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), to represent the voice of peasants and civil society organisations at these fora. Cameroun, the host country of the African Organisation for Intellectual Property Rights (OAPI) with 17 francophone African member countries, is a strategic place for CSO engaging for peasants' rights to seeds.

First International Conference on Just Transition in the Oil Palm Industry

In the 21st century, the palm oil industry is still characterised by serious ecological and social problems, most already well documented in countless reports. The solution the industry and certain environmental NGOs put forward is the Round Table for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), certifying large-scale industrial monocultures as 'sustainable'. To be profitable, these industrial plantations rely on exploiting cheap and precarious workers, cheap land and destroying forest and water sources. So far, after 20 years of existence, the RSPO has not delivered real solutions to the disastrous effects of the still-expanding industry.

Learning from the Just Transition initiatives developed by trade unions and the wider labour movement in response to the climate emergency, a new coalition for Just Transition in the Palm Oil Industry is emerging in and beyond Indonesia. It brings together labour, land rights, and environmental justice activists to create a vision of a transformative strategy for a different kind of palm oil production – socially, ecologically just, and sustainable.



November 2023, the first inter-national 'just transition' conference in Samabas, Indonesia.

At an international conference on 'Just Transition in the Palm Oil Industry' in November 2023, over 150 workers and activists gathered in Sambas, West Kalimantan – in the heart of the plantation landscape. During four days, the participants from all over Indonesia and several countries in Asia, Africa and Europe discussed the relationship between working conditions and ecological destruction in the palm oil industry, addressing issues such as the super-exploitation of women workers, pesticides, the pollution of rivers, groundwater and drinking water, health issues, land grabbing, debt, organising strategies, alliances between workers, farmers and indigenous peoples. The participants also started to develop an alternative perspective for the social-ecological transformation of the industry. A final declaration issued at the conference's end summarises these diverse actors' main demands. A follow-up conference and meetings in Switzerland and Germany are currently planned for the end of 2024.

Achievements & Perspectives

Achievements in the Past Years & in 2023

Climate Justice

In January 2023, HEKS, together with ECCHR and WALHI, supported the launch of the **climate lawsuit against Holcim** (<https://callforclimatejustice.org/en/>) that received national and international media

attention (see above). Four Indonesians are, for the first time, suing a big Carbon Major (Holcim). The lawsuit got international media attention (incl. a Guardian article). This is the world's first climate lawsuit from the Global South asking for loss and damage compensation. In October 2023, the Zug Cantonal Court approved the request of Asmania, Arif, Bobby and Edi for legal aid. This is an important interim step for the four plaintiffs in continuing the proceedings against the Zug-based Holcim AG. The case represents the first time a Swiss court addresses whether a corporation can be held liable under civil law for its contribution to climate change. In June 2023, two of the plaintiffs attended the Climate negotiations in Bonn and visited Switzerland for several meetings with members of the Swiss parliament, church communities and two representatives of the Swiss 'Klima-Seniorinnen'¹.

During **COP28**, countries operationalised the Loss and Damage Finance Facility, thanks to the year-long work of our partner organisations (ICCCAD and CPRD) on Loss & Damage. Its Transitional Committee must still define fund sources, governance, beneficiary selection criteria, etc. This was a decade-old demand from our two partner organisations together with the group of 77 developing countries. During COP28, countries made pledges of 600 million USD. This is a first step even if the loss and damage amount to several hundreds of billion globally. HEKS/EPER staff published several blog articles on the lawsuit and climate justice (around COP28), as well as media releases with Alliance Sud and the Climate Alliance Switzerland.

Furthermore, HEKS/EPER contributed to creating the coalition '**Christians for Climate Protection**' to lobby for the Swiss Climate Protection Law in June 2023. HEKS/EPER is a founding member of this coalition. Together with Climate Alliance Switzerland, HEKS/EPER participated in the mobilisation for a big climate march in Bern in September 2023, where 60,000 gathered to demand more climate protection and justice.

Work of partner organisations in Indonesia and Bangladesh: a) *WALHI* supported the claimants of the climate lawsuit with media training. *WALHI* made a webinar in May on the climate lawsuit as well as a social media campaign. The climate plaintiffs were invited to speak to several conferences and events in Indonesia, Germany and Switzerland. In Switzerland, the plaintiffs met five Parliamentarians and several journalists. They also participated in a side event at the SBSTA meeting in Bonn, a round table in a parish in Bern and several meetings with HEKS/EPER staff, management and Board members in Bern and Zürich. b) *ICCCAD* published several policy briefs on Loss & Damage around COP28 in November 2023, organised a meeting at the SBSTA meeting in Bonn in June 202 on Loss & Damage and an online conference in April on locally-led adaptation. c) *CPRD* finalised research in three regions of Bangladesh on the impact of climate change and loss & damage. It organised lobby meetings with the Government of Bangladesh and made several blog publications around COP28 in November 2023. It led to a publication on the Bangladeshi civil society expectations ahead of the COP28.

Right to Seeds for Agroecology and the Right to Food

At the Swiss level, the ecumenical campaign 2023 highlighted the important role of agroecology in transforming the food system towards more climate justice. The Right to Land and Food staff was not only involved in preparing the campaign but also presented at numerous events throughout its implementation. Especially in francophone media, there was quite some interest in the campaign's messages.

Furthermore, HEKS/EPER staff in Switzerland engaged in various public events on the right to food, seeds, and agroecology, including our contribution to the World Food Day event in Geneva.², as well as the

¹ Article 'Even if we lose, we will fight on', on HEKS/EPER's website: <https://en.heks.ch/stories/schweiz/call-for-climatejustice/Klaegerinnen-zu-besuch>.

² See: <https://welternaehrungstag.ch/>

organisation of a public debate on the issue of labour in agroecology during the 'Days of Agroecology'³. Various blogs⁴ were published on these issues.

Through its representation on the Federal FAO Committee (CNS-FAO, a consultative body of the Federal Council on international food security and sustainable food systems), HEKS/EPER is involved at the level of national



World Food Day 2023.

administration. After 12 years, Tina Goethe ended her third term and stepped back from the CNS FAO. The Federal Council elected HEKS/EPER staff Kibrom Mehari as a member from 2024 onwards.

End of 2022, HEKS/EPER organised and participated in the global campaign against UPOV in front of the Swiss parliament: as a result, MP Nicolas Walder initiated a parliamentary initiative⁵ requesting the Federal Council to take UPOV 91 standards out of the negotiation blueprint of EFTA (Swiss) Trade Agreements. This initiative was approved by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Council but did not pass the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Council of States. The political process will continue in 2024. At a high-level meeting, HEKS/EPER with the Swiss Coalition Right to Seed again called upon Seco to change their position.

At the EU level, HEKS/EPER continues to support the lobby on the ongoing negotiations on the EU seed legislation reform. The efforts of the last three years have led to the development of concrete recommendations for EU institutions, asking not to harm peasants' rights to seeds, increasing EU action to tackle biodiversity loss and building synergies with EU policies to enhance resilient, sustainable pathways for all. Even though the European Commission published on the 5th of July 2023 did not include a complete chapter on Policy Coherence for Development in their impact assessment of the EU seed marketing reform, DG INTPA was effectively mobilised by the project team and had, as a result, published a scoping study on current developments on seed law harmonisation in Africa. On the 19th of March 2024, the Agricultural Committee of the European Parliament voted on the seed file in favour of increasing seed diversity and affirming farmers' rights to sell and exchange their seeds under specific conditions or within (some) limitations. Together with Bread for the World, HEKS/EPER was able to publish an article in rural21⁶ just before the final vote in the EU parliament, calling again for the affirmation of farmers' rights and seed diversity.

At the UN level, the advocacy work of HEKS/EPER and its alliance members at the Friends of the Declaration (FOD) and other global partners such as FIAN International paid off last year when the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) decided to set up a working group to support the implementation of UNDROP globally. In addition to calling all member states to promote the UNDROP, the UNHRC also decided to establish, for three years, a Working Group consisting of five independent experts representing various regions. Expected to be operational in early 2024, this Working Group will be instrumental in facilitating the implementation of the UNDROP, identifying and promoting best practices, lessons learned and gaps, as well as fostering collaboration and technical capacity building in this area.

HEKS/EPER's national and regional partners in six countries stepped up their activities on policy advocacy and awareness raising in 2023. In defence of the rights to land, water and seeds, the West African Convergence organised a successful region-wide caravan, reminding national governments and

³ See: <https://agroecologyworks.ch/de/tage-der-agraroekologie/2023/events/labour-and-employment-in-agroecology>

⁴ See: <https://www.heks.ch/blog/2023/landwirtschaft-in-afrika>

⁵ See: <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20220492>

⁶ See: <https://www.rural21.com/english/from-our-partners/detail/article/the-right-to-food-and-eu-seed-marketing-legislation.html>

regional authorities to do more to address climate change and food sovereignty based on agroecology. This caravan sought to highlight women's key role in food sovereignty, diversity and livelihood and called on national governments and community leaders to actively protect and promote women's right to land and seeds, including those working in the informal sectors. Despite the deteriorating security situation in West Africa, this caravan was attended by 250 participants from 14 mainly West African countries and reached over 17'000 people in the five countries it passed across.



Partner COFERSA supports Women in Mali to safeguard their local vegetables and grains.

COFERSA, HEKS/EPER national partner in Mali, produced four new video materials to raise Malian peasants' awareness and knowledge about their rights based on the UNDROP declaration. Copied in over 500 memory sticks, these videos, which contain practical training as well as COFERSA's own experiences in promoting farm-based seeds and food sovereignty, have the potential to reach a large public. In the year under reporting, COFERSA also focused on tackling the lack of good quality and quantity of vegetable seeds that can be cultivated in gardens, one of

the main challenges for securing food in Mali. As such it secured and prepared an extra two hectares of land in five of its cooperatives to boost their production capacities for this purpose. It also put new varieties of maize (red, white and yellow), sorghum, vegetables, manioc, tomatoes and eggplants at its disposal, which is expected to improve access to these special varieties significantly.⁷

Similarly, the work on seed selection and preservation by RADD, HEKS/EPER's Cameroonian partner, was recognised and awarded a prize by the country's Ministry of Research and Science. Its contribution to retracing long-lost local seeds has been particularly appreciated. This work also laid a solid foundation for the successful conduct of the fourth seed fair, which was held in 2024 (see above).

After the huge success achieved by our long-standing partner organisation ANAF AE in Honduras in 2022, when the Supreme Court declared UPOV91 unconstitutional, ANAF AE continued their advocacy work on the seed regulation. Using the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants as an important reference, they achieved their goal of having local seeds outside the scope of the regulation.

Against Land Grabbing and for the Right to Land

HEKS/EPER has published several detailed reports on Land Grabbing through Swiss-based companies, such as Socfin in Liberia or Addax Bioenergy in Sierra Leone. These reports, researched and written together with partner organisations Green Advocates (Liberia) and the Sierra Leonean Network on the Right to Food (Silnorf), paved the ground for important legal activities, advocacy and lobby work in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Switzerland and Germany, as well as at regional and international level (ECOWAS, African Union, EU). In Sierra Leone, this research and the continuous engagement of HEKS/EPER's longstanding partner Silnorf achieved not only compensation of the affected communities through the German government that had co-financed the Addax project but also contributed to the lobby work for a new land law recognising communities' collective land rights. In Liberia, the reports laid the ground for a complaint at the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and legal cases filed by our partner organisation against the plantation company and the Liberian Government. These legal cases are ongoing, and HEKS/EPER

⁷ See: [HEKS/EPER Gender Factsheet 2024](#).



Partner Silnorf supports communities in Sierra Leone to receive land and compensations for their losses.

supports activities to involve communities at every step. According to the partner organisation, these legal cases against land grabbing are the first worldwide.

With several campaigns, HEKS/EPER raised the land-grabbing issue in Switzerland, including ecumenical campaigns on the Addax case and on Credit Suisse's involvement in palm oil plantations in Indonesia, as well as a campaign asking Swiss retailers to reduce the use of palm oil, through conferences, media work, parliamentary motions etc. HEKS/EPER (then Bread for All) effectively strengthened the local partners' engagement and helped bring the cases to the international level. One example is also the effective grassroots resistance against plantation projects in West- and Central Africa supported by HEKS/EPER since 2016. Therefore, the key focus

of HEKS/EPER's work on land grabbing has been and continues to be to strengthen and support these communities in defending their right to land and resisting or reverting land grabbing according to the needs they identify and articulate.

Because of its close collaboration with partners in Sierra Leone, HEKS/EPER learned about a case where a company took over land to plant trees for carbon credits. Residents were informed about their concerns about land rights violations. Together with our local partners Silnorf and Women's Network Against Rural Plantation Injustice (Wonarpi), action research with the affected communities was published in 2024. The company is a Canadian carbon trader, and the involved consultancy is Swiss.

HEKS/EPER did a lot of sensitisation work on the issue of carbon compensation and its connection to land. A website established the background of this topic and, in particular, the connection between carbon offsetting and land-grabbing⁸. At the **HEKS/EPER Land Forum 2023**⁹ the topic of land-based offsetting was discussed in three sessions with international speakers from the Global South. Each session attracted between 175 and 100 participants from 100 different organisations in 86 countries. The Land Forum allowed important insights into the discussions around this topic from very different perspectives. A comprehensive report¹⁰ summarising the inputs and discussions were distributed to all participants. In addition, HEKS/EPER staff was invited five times to universities and technical universities to speak about land grabbing and strategies to support affected communities.

After many years of advocacy and campaigning on the interlinkage of palm oil and land-grabbing, with achieving some success, a real change for the affected people in the producing countries was beyond our reach. Also, the joint efforts of the Swiss palm oil coalition to influence the trade agreement with Indonesia were partly successful. Still, they did not overcome the structural drivers for the disastrous impacts of palm oil plantations. The need for a more systematic approach became clear. HEKS/EPER there started to engage in a long-term project with the transnational palm oil solidarity network TPOLS for a Just Transition in the Palm Oil Industry¹¹.

In 2022 and 2023, the community-based organisations in Cameroon and Liberia were formalised, and their strength increased. This means that affected community members can speak for themselves about their problems and the solutions they want. This community resistance – also strongly supported by HEKS/EPER partner 'Informal Alliance' – increasingly bears fruits, according to new research and media coverage.

⁸ See: <https://en.heks.ch/topic/right-land-and-food/climate-compensation>

⁹ See: <https://www.eper.ch/land-forum-2023>

¹⁰ See: https://www.eper.ch/sites/default/files/documents/2023-12/Land%20Forum%202023_Summary-PDF_DEF_0.pdf

¹¹ See: <https://palmoilabour.network/category/report-and-publication/>

Supported by HEKS/EPER and Pro Natura, Friends of the Earth International closely followed and participated in the COP Biodiversity negotiations to foster regulations for industrial agriculture and agro-commodities that are severely damaging biodiversity. FOEI engaged in intense lobbying and advocacy to influence policy outcomes for the new Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) adopted at the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) in December 2022. The GBF sets a vision for living in harmony with nature by 2050, comprising four goals for 2050 and twenty-three targets for 2030, succeeding the Aichi Biodiversity Targets 2011-2020. FoEI positively impacted the GBF in several areas, including the recognition of environmental human rights defenders (EHRDs) and the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs). With the strengthening of corporate governance, FoEI influenced the business target to ensure that it was framed regarding government action towards business. Between 2022 and 2024, several background material was published: The Nature of Business report¹², which exposed the strategies and tactics used by corporate actors in the CBD, was published in advance of the COP and received widespread attention; the report on Agricultural Biodiversity in the CBD¹³ informed and supported interventions by FoEI and allies in the negotiations. In 2023, two publications were developed that raise awareness with allies and FoEI member groups and will support advocacy in the CBD in 2024; these are the report 'The False Solutions, Real Profits—Agribusiness' Tactics Uncovered' and the report 'The False Solutions, Real Profits—Agribusiness' Tactics Uncovered'.¹⁴ report as well as four Factsheets on what the Global Biodiversity Framework¹⁵ says about rights, regulations, agriculture, and conservation.

Business and Human Rights

Before its merger with HEKS, Business and Human Rights was one of the thematic focus areas of Bread for all, with projects in fair supply chains, batteries/e-mobility and recycling, as well as on corporate accountability in the narrower sense. For over ten years, Bread for all published reports on the activities of multinational corporations – e.g., on Holcim in Uganda, Vitol in South Africa, OCP in Marrocco or Glencore in DRC. Since the merger, the resources in this area have shrunk significantly. In one year, resources in this area of HEKS/EPER staff were reduced from 220% to 70%. Nevertheless, at the same time, the process of the corporate strategy of HEKS/EPER confirmed that the organisation will continue to work on the areas of business and human rights and environmental impacts of private actor engagements and investigate abuses in these areas.

HEKS/EPER continues to support the former partner organisations of Bread for All in the DRC, Afrewatch and CAJJ. These partners work on the negative impacts of the extractive industry in countries in the Global South, specifically in the DRC. The projects focus on empowering communities to defend their livelihoods, research, advocacy, and legal assistance to victims of abuses concerning mining activities in these countries. Based on this work, a team around Milo Rau premiered the acclaimed 'Opera Justice' based on a case reported by HEKS/EPER at the Grand Théâtre in Geneva in 2024. The support of the partner organisations in the DRC will continue in the next years as an ecumenical project in cooperation with the catholic NGO Fastenaktion. At the same time, HEKS/EPER continues to be an engaged member of the Swiss Coalition for Corporate Justice and remains actively committed to the goal of a strong human rights and environmental due diligence law in Switzerland.

Swiss Alliance against SLAPPs: In September 2023, the Swiss Alliance against SLAPPs (<https://www.allianz-gegen-slapp.ch/>) was institutionalised after HEKS/EPER had contributed for two years to establish the facts around SLAPPs in Switzerland against NGOs and co-led the creation and establishment of the alliance in 2021 and 2022. SLAPP stands for '*strategic litigation against public participation*' and is a term used to describe legal complaints from businesses or wealthy individuals

¹² See: <https://www.foei.org/publication/corporate-capture-nature-of-business-report/>

¹³ See: <https://www.foei.org/publication/replanting-agricultural-biodiversity-in-the-cbd/>

¹⁴ See: <https://www.foei.org/publication/agribusiness-false-solutions-real-profit/>

¹⁵ See: <https://www.foei.org/publication/factsheets-global-biodiversity-framework/>

against participants of civil society, including NGOs, journalists, or media outlets. The only goal of these legal complaints is to have a chilling effect on civil society members, deterring them from publishing critical research or articles about businesses or wealthy individuals. SLAPPs represent a threat to the right to freedom of expression and information. The problem of SLAPPs remains urgent in Switzerland, as the number of SLAPPs against NGOs is on the rise, with prominent examples of Public Eye and Swissaid¹⁶.

Perspectives 2024 and Onwards

Climate Justice

HEKS/EPER advocates for Climate Justice, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable people, and the just and equitable sharing of the burdens and benefits of climate change and its impacts.

Consequent implementation of the Paris Agreement

- Output 1.1. Driving and supporting policies and actions for net zero emissions by 2040 in Switzerland
- Output 1.2. Sensitise the public in Switzerland on the responsibility of the Carbon Majors for the climate crisis and the urgent need for them to decarbonise (part of the work of the climate lawsuit)
- Output 1.3. Supporting advocacy, campaigns and policies for a just climate finance of Switzerland (Alliance Sud / Swiss Climate Alliance)

Just compensation for climate-induced loss and damage

- Output 2.1. Supporting advocacy, campaigns and policies in Switzerland aimed at a just compensation of climate-induced loss and damage
- Output 2.2. Holding a Swiss Carbon Major accountable for losses and damages in the global South
- Output 2.3. Supporting partners in their advocacy and research work on loss and damage (mainly ICCCAD and CPRD in Bangladesh and WALHI in Indonesia, to find an additional partner in Africa)

Right to Seeds for Agroecology and the Right to Food

Promoting UNDROP in Switzerland and abroad

- Switzerland and other sympathetic countries support the creation of a special rapporteur or monitoring mechanism at the UN HRC (With FOD)
- Sensitizing and training partner organisations on the application of UNDROP and other tools, such as UPR, to claim their right to food.
- Increased and fruitful exchange with interested HEKS/EPER country programmes and respective partner organizations on peasants' right to seeds and seeds for agroecology – with a min. of 3 meetings with respective countries/partners.

Fight UPOV91 and strengthen farm-based seed systems and seed diversity.

- Fostering public discourse on farmers' right to seeds and agroecological, just food systems through an Ecumenical campaign on Climate Justice and Agroecology, publication of articles and blogs, and organisation of and participation at public events.
- Pressure on the Swiss administration to not take out the UPOV91 clause in future trade agreements (e.g. with Thailand and Malaysia)
- Participation at Global Week of Action No-to-UPOV

Strengthening and supporting partner organisations to carry out their priority activities for 2023

- CONVERGENCE successfully carries out the 2023 caravan, which will focus on the land rights for pastoralist populations living in the Sahara

¹⁶ See: <https://www.allianz-gegen-slapp.ch/slapp-faelle/swissaid>

- COASP and RADD successfully conduct their peasant seed fairs and carry on the momentum to sustain advocacy in their respective regions
- SYNPA intensifies its monitoring and vigilance so the UPOV91 proposal is not revived in Benin.
- Latin American Seeds collective to strengthen education and sensitisation work on IPRs on seeds
- ANAFEA continues to monitor and lobby on upcoming seed-related legislation
- The staff of HEKS/EPER and implementing partners have increased knowledge and skills about HRBA to seeds, UNDROP and agroecology and can implement accordingly.

Against Land Grabbing and for the Right to Land

Policies and regulations to hold Swiss actors accountable for and to impede land-grabbing.

- Swiss corporations/financial actors involved in Land Grabbing are exposed, and the pressure on them to change grows.
- An alliance in the palm oil sector develops a vision and gains first successes towards a just transition of the palm oil sector.
- The risk that land-based CO₂-offsetting as a climate change mitigation measure can lead to land grabbing is better known and is no longer pursued.

Strong partner organisations and alliances can engage against land grabbing and for the right to land.

- Supporting partner organisations and networks.
- Providing direct support to environmental and human rights defenders in cases of emergency.

Business and Human Rights

HEKS/EPER will continue to advocate for stricter rules on corporate responsibility in Switzerland and abroad. It will investigate and document, together with its partner organisations, cases of human rights violations and environmental damages in the Global South caused by daughter companies of Swiss corporations or companies with other ties to Switzerland (financial, supply chain, etc.) and call for accountability of the perpetrators and full compensation for the victims. In 2024, a priority focus will continuously be on the human rights impact of the carbon footprint of the global cement producer Holcim and the preparatory works for the next steps in Switzerland with the Coalition for Corporate Justice.

HEKS/EPER will support its partners and networks in their advocacy and research work on corporate accountability (CAJJ and Afrewatch in the DRC) and explore further areas of corporate accountability in the positioning themes of the upcoming HEKS/EPER strategy 25-28.

This is HEKS/EPER

HEKS/EPER is the aid organisation of the Swiss Protestant Churches. It operates in four fields – Climate Justice, Inclusion, Right to Land & Food, Displacement & Migration – towards a more just, equitable and peaceful world with resilient communities.

In 2023, HEKS/EPER Switzerland supported with 45 programmes in 15 Swiss cantons the inclusion of 133'000 people. HEKS/EPER Global Cooperation (GC) assisted in 37 countries with 235 projects, 7.13 million people directly in economic, social or humanitarian need, and 9.5 million indirectly.

The operating corporate income of the whole organisation has risen to 137.28 M CHF and expenditure to 138.49 M CHF – of which 75.03 M CHF (2022: 54.54 M CHF) were net costs spent for the global programme.

GC spent 28.09 M CHF (net costs) on Development Cooperation, ameliorating the lives of 3.688.478 people directly. It promoted politics and practices enabling sustainable systems change and implemented 98 development projects, focusing on right/access to land and resources, fostering sustainable agricultural production, climate mitigation and adaptation, peaceful societies, and socio-economic inclusion. 7.774.356 people benefitted indirectly, e.g., through successful advocacy for introducing or securing rights and supportive policies.

In 2023, HEKS/EPER reached 3.391.213 people directly with its 89 humanitarian projects in 21 countries and net expenses of 44.88 M CHF, and 1.153.096 individuals were reached indirectly.

In the frame of Church Cooperation, with 21 projects and 2.06 M CHF, GC supported the social and humanitarian work of Reformed Churches and organisations in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, reaching 47'232 people directly and another 522'048 indirectly.

HEKS/EPER sensitises the needs and rights of people and communities worldwide, addressing causes of global inequalities and possible solutions. To inform the public, media, politics and other stakeholders in Switzerland to achieve a transition to a more equitable, peaceful world, preserving the limited natural resources, HEKS/EPER spent 5.26 M CHF on advocacy and policy work, coordinated through 25 projects. GC maintains links to partners, alliances, and networks in Switzerland and worldwide to ensure outreach.

Global Cooperation strives towards a systems change with its human rights-based approach, promoting locally-led solutions, the communities' ownership, innovation, and the nexus between humanitarian aid, development activities and peacebuilding endeavours. Jointly with proficient partners and well-connected alliances, HEKS/EPER fosters constant dialogue between civil society, the private sector, and Government actors. It enables people and communities to participate and advocate for their needs and rights.

GC applies risk-informed, evidence-based, environment-, conflict- and gender-sensitive, results-oriented, adaptive programming. A transparent governance and compliance framework with high safeguarding and management standards ensures accountability and monitors and evaluates whether our projects have an effective impact and add value for the people we collaborate with.

The nine core values of HEKS/EPER are Justice, Self-Determination, Participation, Respect, Solidarity, Support without Borders, Close to People, Effectiveness, and Accountability.


Strategies, policies, guidelines, and reports published on GC's Governance Website: https://en.heks.ch/Institutional_Governance

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HEKS/EPER

Global Office +41 44 360 88 00
Seminarstrasse 28 info@heks.ch
P.O. Box heks.ch
CH-8042 Zürich IBAN CH37 0900 0000 8000 1115 1



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