

At Helvetas, ‘we work for the poorest’

The Swiss organization operates in 32 countries, reaching some 3.6 million people last year.

By David Karas / Correspondent

ZURICH, SWITZERLAND
A nondescript office building just a short walk from the Limmat River – which runs through the picturesque center of Zurich, Switzerland – houses the hub of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation.

The effect of the nongovernmental organization, however, is anything but ordinary – reaching some 3.6 million people around the world last year alone across projects encompassing everything from ensuring rural water supplies to promoting sound governance and peace.

“We work for the poorest,” says Rupa Mukerji, co-head of advisory services for Helvetas and a member of its management

get and the efforts of some 1,500 staffers, more than 95 percent of whom are local to their projects.

It is perhaps difficult to capture the essence of Helvetas, given that its work ranges from building relatively small bridges to advising governments and global entities. But a common thread through the NGO’s efforts is its desire for a more just world – and its commitment to working toward positive, lasting change.

When Helvetas collaborates with the governments of developing societies, it takes an approach sensitive to regional and global conflicts and draws on the experiences of nations including Switzerland to share best practices. Concepts and practices like federalism, Ms. Mukerji says, can be useful models for other nations to follow.

“They find it very interesting to learn from the Swiss experience,” she says. “There are quite a few things that we have to contribute in governance from the Swiss experience.”

As a leader of Helvetas’s advisory services wing, Mukerji heads a team of senior development specialists who advise clients that include the United Nations, the World Bank, governments, and companies.

Saleemul Huq, director of the Bangladesh-based International Centre for Climate Change and Development, is familiar with Helvetas’s activities in the area, which have “had a significant impact on the poor communities in Bangladesh where [the organization works],” he says via email.



DAVID KARAS

AT HELVETAS’S HEADQUARTERS: Rupa Mukerji heads a team that advises clients including the UN and the World Bank.

At Helvetas, there is ‘a huge commitment to evidence, to research and development, and to real sustainability. Everybody says that, but Helvetas really means it.’

– **Gisela Keller**, a consultant in international relations who was recently named managing director of Helvetas USA

Gisela Keller, a consultant in the field of international relations, began working with Helvetas in 2012. “It is like a hidden gem in the mountains of Switzerland,” she says. “There is really deep knowledge and a huge commitment to evidence, to research and development, and to real sustainability. Everybody says that, but Helvetas really means it.”

Ms. Keller was recently named managing director of Helvetas USA, a New York-based nonprofit launched last year to strengthen key relationships between the Swiss hub and American partners.

For Mukerji, seeing progress result from the work of herself and others is rewarding – and serves as inspiration to do more.

“You can see the change, and that is very important for us – to make a difference in the lives of the poorest,” she says.

■ For more, visit helvetas.org.

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Founded in 1955, Helvetas is one of the largest Swiss-based international development NGOs, and a leading institution in Europe. The organization operates in 32 countries to address rural poverty, harnessing a \$150 million annual bud-

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