

Elmar Ledergerber. Solidarity with the word.

Elmar Ledergerber, president of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, has become well-known throughout Switzerland, as a member of the Swiss National Council and as the Mayor of the City of Zurich. Less well-known, however, is the fact that he has been engaged with development cooperation and development policy throughout his career, from university up to the present day.

Born in 1944, Elmar Ledergerber graduated in history and literature at the University of Fribourg. Later, he obtained a degree in Foreign Trade in Development Countries from the University of St. Gallen. He finished his studies by obtaining a PhD in Economics (Dr. oec. HSG).

His professional career began - while still studying - during a long stay in Latin America, working as a journalist focusing on the problems of developing countries. In 1980 he evaluated the well-known suspension bridge programme in Nepal on behalf of Helvetas and developed it into a programme better adapted to local conditions, in which the bridges cost ten times less. Ledergerber worked on the suspension bridge programme for 15 years. It became an international success.

Ledergerber's work centred on the areas of environment, energy, spatial planning and infrastructure development in Switzerland and abroad. He was a partner at the consulting office INFRAS and later the owner and CEO of Ecoconcept. As a representative of the Social Democratic Party he was a member of the Cantonal Council of Zurich from 1979 to 1987 and of the National Council from 1987 to 1998. Ledergerber was elected to the municipal government of Zurich in 1998 and was elected Mayor in 2002. He resigned from his posts in 2009, aged 65.

From 1999 onwards, Ledergerber came into close contact with development cooperation once more by means of his second appointment as the President of Intercooperation. Together with Peter Arbenz, President of the Board of Directors of Helvetas, he led the merger process of the two development organizations which was completed in 2011 with the founding of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation. Arbenz, who saw the merger as his last great contribution to Helvetas, resigned a year later. The General Assembly of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation appointed Elmar Ledergerber as the new President on 23 June 2012.

In conversation, Ledergerber has expressed his commitment to development cooperation and development policy as follows: "It allowed me to develop myself incredibly. It has changed my world view. My primary motivation is to work for a more just world. It always has been." Ledergerber says that he finds the same kind of motivation within Helvetas and also amongst the 100,000 people who support the organization with their donations and actions. His goal is to further strengthen this important foundation because, as he insists, "development cooperation has a future only if it is supported by the people of Switzerland. We have to show what we do and revitalize the solidarity again and again."