

Annual Report 2020 by the Chair of AFS Switzerland - A Chronology of Events

When I think of last year, this German saying seems to me most appropriate:

Erstens kommt es anders, und zweitens als man denkt (alleged to Wilhelm Busch)

Or to quote John Lennon, with a similar thought:

Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans

It all began so well, so full of hope, because 2019 had been a very good year for AFS Switzerland, and we were sure to be on the right track for even higher participant numbers and thereby more impact for our mission and even better finances in 2020.

- AND THEN CAME CORONA! And our lives changed dramatically, in an unprecedented way, and nothing was as before!

Never before did we have to repatriate all our students, never has the organization faced a period with no students on a program, never did the staff have to show so much flexibility in a tremendous strain in dealing with panicking parents, unhappy kids, cancelled flights etc.; and never before did they experience times so full of uncertainty. Last but not least, never was the Board more challenged, did we invest more time into safeguarding the organization, never were we as closely monitoring finances, operations, and developments within and outside of AFS Switzerland.

Nobody ever imagined that we could have so many Zoom calls, so many crisis meetings, so many frustrations – and all of this not because of mismanagement by anybody, but because of a tiny virus which changed the world as we knew it!

Extraordinary circumstances demand unusual actions: The Annual Report 2020 differs in form from previous ones; here is my (SW) chronology, from a Board perspective; it aims at giving you an insight, month by month, into an extraordinary, unforgettably busy and worrying year, a year that has marked us all forever.

January

The year 2020 started with a lot of planning for an expected good year with more growth.

- **Strategy:** a group of Board members, staff and key volunteers, with Lisa Drössler in the lead, continued working out a new 5-year strategic plan for AFS Switzerland, which was to be presented at the GA 2021 (later the project had to be put on ice).
- **Board Meeting:** planned on 430 Pax -> adapted higher staff FTEs, with increase in Volunteering, Support and Marketing
- **GA:** planned a big GA in Aarau with renowned guest speaker & alumni get-together
- Board set up provisions from good financial result for projects in 2020
- Board plans to have a closer contact between Board & Staff: Every Board Responsibility Area (BRA) is directly linked to a staff member
- **EFIL:** strategy on the agenda (later had to be adjusted to realities)
- **European Chairs Platform** planned for May in Brussels: SW on prep team again
- **Corona:** Jan 30th: First impact of the virus: message from INT: "AFS suspends current hosting activities in China and Hong Kong due to coronavirus outbreak".

February

A lot of planning for GA & preparation of documents

- Annual Report, short version in G and F, long version in E
- Finance Report by Partner Director and Finance Committee, budget finalization by Board and PD Luc Estapé (LE)
- **GA:** detail planning: contact with guest speaker, Alumnireport, Alumni event
- **Across:** articles, introduction letter, editorial, info about GA
- **European Chairs Platform:** SW responsible for all logistics
- **First Covid-related message from SUI:** Feb 25th: Reorientation and Language Schooling: will be online
- **Corona:** disinfectants are sold out; hygiene measures announced by LE: only paper towels at office, wash hands frequently with soap, no disinfectant available
- **INT Network:** consultation period for the new Articles of Partnership, the binding contract of AFS Partners, ends end of Feb (nobody has time to give input).

March

Now the situation accelerates with frightening speed!

- **INT:** Zoom address by AFS CEO Daniel Obst to Partners, March 3rd: INT has established decision-making criteria about Covid-19, regarding country safety
- **SUI office:** many activities by staff to inform different stakeholders of covid-driven changes; SUI reacted quickly, but there was concern about objections against cancelling all in-person meetings, draft of communications to HoFams and SeFams about covid-related challenges
- **Board** decision, March 5th: Regarding the GA (online or in-person), await government verdict about possible measures (people weren't ready yet to believe how bad it would get)
- **Finances:** Finance Committee (FC) meeting, March 7th: because of withdrawals by participants (pax), we already think of worst case (-50% pax), capital drain. First mention of short-time employment by Cuno Singer, Board member with Finance BRA
- **Strategy planning:** is put on hold mid-March
- **Network:** more POs cancel exchange programs: -> situation accelerates towards global crisis
- **Switzerland:** March 13th: decision that all schools close until at least April 4th
- **INT:** March 14th: message from Daniel Obst: *"we have made the painful but necessary decision to end all current hosting programs (both 18+ and 18-) for the safety and wellbeing of our students, families, volunteers and staff."*

Thus began the most incredibly resource-consuming and hectic repatriation action in AFS history, executed by all offices and many volunteers in emergency mode. Daniel Obst later referred to it like this: *«While our Network has navigated many crises, this was the first time ever in our long history that we cancelled all of our programs everywhere to protect our participants. AFS staff and volunteers worked around the clock for weeks to make sure that each and every participant—almost 7,000—made it home safely.»*

Our flyer entitled “*Mission Impossible*” exemplifies how AFS SUI functioned during the first weeks of the Corona crisis, with testimonials by fresh returnees, host families and staff members. Links: [German Version](#), [French Version](#)

- **SUI Office:** Sunday, March 15th: Staff and volunteers coordinate phone calls to 350 SeFams and HoFams: -> Dramatic reactions by families and participants: disbelief, tears, anger, frustration.
- **Switzerland:** as of March 16th: Lockdown; home office mandatory, stores are closed...
- **Board:** Zoom meeting March 16th: All our planning suspended, regular agenda points replaced by crisis management, concerns about financial loss, costs for repatriation flights; incredible workload by LE and his staff; SW attends all team Zoom calls and all info calls to stakeholders.
- **SUI Office in crisis mode:** LE organized two daily staff Zoom calls to coordinate the work, and to check in emotionally. All ‘normal’ work is suspended: Every single staff member works on the repatriation of our students, weekends included. The emergency phone rings day and night.
- **First Reactions** by Swiss families & volunteers: want their kids to stay, want to keep their hosted students, don’t understand the decisions for program stop -> We fear for our reputation.
- **INT:** daily info from international headquarters chase each other, lots of coordinating mails and phone calls between Partner offices create an incredible amount of info.
- **European Chairs Platform:** Prep Team decides to cancel Brussels: Zoom instead, reorganize agenda
- **Info Zoom calls:** by SUI on specific topics to several different stakeholders, in German and French, with LE and SW, and some staff. Max. attendance 110 participants in one call.
- **Appeal by SUI Chair:** March 22nd: letter to our volunteers, beginning with an appeal for solidarity (which I could repeat today, over a year later): *«AFS befindet sich im akutesten Krisenmodus aller Zeiten. Das Überleben von vielen AFS Organisationen weltweit ist in reeller Gefahr. Vorläufig steht AFS Schweiz noch nicht am Abgrund, aber wir brauchen die absolute Solidarität von jedem von euch, um unsere Reputation zu schützen.»*
- **Reactions, as lockdowns increase:** mood reversed: now the parents cannot wait for their kids to get home. Frantic actions from all sides as lockdowns increase, flights are being cancelled, borders close. Staff around the globe work non-stop to get all teenagers back home safely.
- **Repatriations:** March 23rd: 112 Swiss exchange students are back home (within 1 week)
Night of March 31st to April 1st: Biggest repatriation action: buses with 60 students returning from USA arrive in CH from Frankfurt airport.
- **Finances:** The repatriation flights will eventually cost us 280'000 CHF. Early in the month, LE had applied for a government guaranteed bank loan of 424'000 CHF, to be paid back within 5 years. We received the loan at the end of March, which will help our liquidity considerably.

April

This month, AFS SUI got great media coverage; big workload by SW to initiate, organize and coordinate TV and Tagesanzeiger reports.

- **Media: National TV** coverage: «Schweiz aktuell» broadcasts the arrival of the busses in Zürich
- **Media: Radio SRF3:** April 6: “Musikwunsch”: Karin Estapé mentions and thanks AFS for their incredible work. Thanks to Luc’s wife for this nice surprise!
- **Media: Tagesanzeiger:** April 18th: article in the Saturday edition of the Tagesanzeiger, full page, with pictures: “Der geplatzte Traum” by Sandro Benini: Interviews with 3 Swiss fresh returnees and one hosted student.
- **Repatriation:** April 8th: all 250 Swiss exchange students are back home. 21 hosted students remain in their host families, because they cannot go home (total lockdown of their countries)
- **ReturnManagement:** start of *ReturnManagement*: special action to monitor the situation with the fresh returnees and to assist them with their possible frustrations of the abrupt program stop: 4’480 min of phone conversations! Great work by many volunteers, coordinated by Reto from staff. A big thank you!
- **Online tool:** GCC online module especially adapted for fresh returnees is offered by INT.
- **Board:** several Meetings and phone calls, lots of emails: scenario planning for NH20, for survival, for 2021... Board is considering short-time work, looking into legal aspects
- **INT:** ongoing floods of emails with directives by the risk management, Zoom calls with info, LE, as 1 of 8 PDs, is part of INT scenario planning group with daily meetings, and in other groups, besides his PDR engagement: Huge workload for international affairs, both by Luc and SW.
- **INT Admin:** announces austerity measures by eliminating 14 FTEs from INT Admin, reduction of budget by 1.7Mio \$
- **European Chairs Platform:** A lot of prep team organization, finalizing agenda & online discussions

May

The first wave of the pandemic is subsiding; almost no pax are in a program anymore; however, our concerns at AFS are all but over. The survival of the heavily afflicted Network is at stake; financial considerations are foremost in our Board’s worries.

- **Office:** May 5th: after 7 weeks of home office and daily morning Zoom staff calls: LE announces gradual changes towards more normality
- **European Chairs’ Platform:** May 9th: 24 pax from 18 Partner organizations: very good and much-needed discussions and exchanges, sharing of difficulties. To be continued.
- **Board:** In crisis mode, we need Board meetings at least once a month. Close monitoring of finances, the development of pax applications and operational issues in general become essential. More worst-case scenarios are worked out by LE, substantial cuttings of fixed costs are discussed. Board decision to start short-time work (later postponed to Sept.)

- **Finances:** Executive Financial Committee, with Jürg Rüttimann. LE seeks assistance from volunteer Christian Herter, for controlling of finances and forecasts.
- **Crisis around us:** Rotary is hibernating; YFU struggles for survival; several small AFS Partners are in hibernation or are forced to close down their organization.
- **INT:** traffic light system by INT implemented (worked out by int. working group with LE): criteria determine which Partner is viable and allowed to do programs. SW is asked to join reference group for Partner Viability Assessment: several int. meetings.
- **Media:** May 18th: article in “Zürcher Oberländer”: Interview of Stocker’s hosted son from Dom. Republic, still stuck in SUI (and happy about that).

June

With the colder temperatures in the southern hemisphere, first and second waves of the pandemic hit more and more countries hard. Most of them keep lockdowns and close borders, while in Switzerland, people are getting used to the comparably light restrictions.

- **EFIL:** June 4th: EFIL extraordinary GA by Zoom, with attendance of both PDs and Chairs
- **Corona Switzerland:** June 8th, announcement of Bundesrat: Lockdown is over, Staff may work at office, with hygienic measures (masks for public transport recommended)
- **Finances:** Minimal cash flow reserves for worst case scenario have to be guaranteed. Evaluation of several means to get financial help; questions about possible Mercator money: Loan or à-fonds-perdu? Conditions?
- **Network:** big uncertainties about NH20 (borders of all Latin American countries and most Asian Partners still closed). Situation from SUI side not so bad, applications are here, but matrix, i.e., hosting spots lack.
- **Board Meeting:** June 19th: A rolling planning is the only sure factor among ever-changing parameters: extremely difficult to forecast the next two cycles. Board is informed weekly about developments. Monitoring of cash flow and liquidity, reserves and forecasts, scenarios, the situation in the Network: updates come in daily. Big flexibility asked of everybody involved.
Board decides to postpone short-time work or staff cuts again to July meeting.
- **Office:** online camps, online language courses are organized again.
- **Network:** Partner offices worry about their schools not willing to accept HoStus. Daily email contact with Partners and INT, SW more with Chairs, LE more with PDs and in PDR.
- **INT:** Partner Accreditation process working group for criteria: SW is asked to participate
- **European Chairs:** reaction after viability report of INT: afraid that several European POs will be forced to close down. SW part of initiative group to appeal to EFIL to help in this matter.
- **INT:** decides to reduce the POs’ management fees, because of the Covid-crisis.
June 30: Revised Articles of Partnership enter into effect, without ado.

July

With the lockdown removed in Switzerland, and summer arrived, people are relieved and think that the crisis is over. We at AFS are confronted with the situations in the worldwide Network and know that it is far from being over.

- **Highlight Grillparty:** in the Bäckeranlage, 30 AFSers, from staff & Board and 15 volunteers; also celebrating Luc Estapé's 5-year anniversary at AFS.
- **Fundraising:** Special fundraising campaign, initiated and executed by Board, since mid-Mai: early in July, the fundraising flyer titled "*Mission impossible*" is in 6500 households, after innumerable hours of voluntary work. Great thanks to Board members Carla & Shady for the idea, to Natacha for the translations, to Elena and Brigitte from the staff. Coordination: SW.
It will generate over 40'000 CHF!
- **Donations:** The designer of our printing material, Markus Kuhn of KplusH has generously sponsored their work for our fundraising campaign "*Mission Impossible*": A big thank you!
Small to substantial donations from private donors have been coming in since March, including a dozen 4-digit sums: AFS SUI thanks every donor for their generosity.
- **INT:** Cancels Global Conference and Network Meeting in Singapore in Oct. AGM and GloCo virtually; Network Meeting planned in-person for 1st quarter of 2021 (later cancelled)
- **EFIL:** still hopes that an in-person meeting will be possible in Nov! And HOO meeting in Belgrade in Oct (both cancelled later)
- **European Chairs:** monthly meetings, sharing realities are very much appreciated
- **Network:** SUI gets green light for Hosting starting mid-Aug
AFS Australia is forced to close permanently
Swiss government puts 29 countries on list 'not recommended for travel'
Some 60 students worldwide are still 'sheltered' in their HoFams; 1 of them in SUI.

August

The NH20 program cycle has started, on a very limited scale. Exchanges are only possible within Europe.

- **Office:** Our Sending numbers dwindled, from 148 to 54 pax, because of restricted destinations, lockdowns in overseas countries. After big Hosting effort: organizing Quarantine Camps.
- **Finances:** Meeting with whole Board: concerns about liquidity; long debate staff cuts or short time employment
Board Decision: Start with substantial short-time work in Aug or Sept
Depending on the scenario: fear of having to dissolve 300-600k CHF of reserves to stay liquid (in spite of government loan); fear of a deficit of 900k CHF for 2020 (it will turn out to be a bit over half of that).
- **General Assembly:** Mon 17th, at 6 pm: 63rd GA SUI by Virtual Zoom, reduced to the purely statutory business; small attendance; only SW and LE do presentations. Appeal to financial experts to come forward and advise the Board on financial planning.

- **Finances:** Zoom with 4 'Senior Experts' who offer their advice in financial crisis management. Their individual advice proves congruent to high degree: We must take austerity decisions now. No more loans (repayable); do not use external money to keep operative business going. Scenario planning good, define triggers. Survival mode demands measures. Close monitoring by Board: good.
- **INT:** Partner Accreditation workgroup (SW): intensive finalizing of accreditation policy
- **Fundraising:** Planning of Nov Spotlight has started at the office, involving Board about content.
- Planning of Board meets Staff on Sept 9th, in SW's garden (Afterwards cancelled, because of Covid restrictions inside) Another traditional occasion for interaction between Board and staff cannot take place.

September

As some BMs had never met before, and for team building reasons, the Board deemed it very important to have an in-person retreat. Luckily, we could do so privately, in a big old farmhouse, self-catering, in Wildhaus.

- **Board Retreat:** Sept 11th-13th. In-depth discussions about the future of our organization. Agreement that we must take austerity measures in view of the low NH20 pax numbers, resulting in lower income (estimated yearly volume of 1.8 mil compared to 4.2 mil). By reversing the approach, LE considers 5 FTEs plus 3 interns the minimum staff capacity still allowing to run the office and handle approximately 150 pax. Decision to operate with these numbers. The flexibility of short-time work would allow us to quickly boost up, as soon as more pax become realistic. Rolling planning is the only way in these uncertain times.

Looking into a post-Covid mid- to long-term strategy, the Board brainstorms possibilities for alternative sources of income with new business models.

- **INT:** As always since March, there is a lot going on at the international level and the various working groups that we are engaged in, taking up considerable time and energy for LE and SW. But both of us are working hand-in-hand in issues that we consider of the utmost importance. The reward of this outstanding engagement is that our voices are heard, and our work is seen as target-aimed for a better Network. Nevertheless, it cannot be taken for granted that a PD invests so much of his weekends and evenings into the future of the AFS Network. I would also like to explicitly thank the Estapé family for letting LE commit all this extra time for AFS.
- **Network:** Big concerns about our biggest Partner AFS USA: BoT taskforce to consider using other organizations besides AFS USA for the high Hosting demand. USA sees this as a threat. European Chairs initiate a letter in support of USA, and the Asian Partners do likewise. Many discussions with INT ensue.
- **Office:** Information to the staff of the Board Retreat decisions and their implementation are time-consuming and challenging. Finetuning is necessary.

October

In preparation for several upcoming online Network calls, replacing the traditional yearly in-person Network meeting, there are activities on multiple international levels.

Global Conference: Oct 21st-22nd: a conference with other non-profit organizations with similar values and panel discussions with guests etc.

Also an Ideathon, initiated by young AFS volunteers from around the world: brainstorming for projects to further Active Global Citizens (AGC).

- **INT:** Great concern by almost all POs about the Network fees, which are too high, threatening the survival of several Partners. Crisis in the Network about that. INT defends the need for their high fees to finance their services to the POs. Partners question the need of all services during the pandemic. European Chairs and PDs discuss measures on fee and services situation. LE as PDR is very much involved.
- **Network:** Several Board Chairs had planned to step down in 2020 or in 2021 but are forced to stay on because they cannot find successors who are willing to take the lead during the crisis.
- **INT Risk Management:** Criteria for green light for Hosting: enough emergency room hospital capacities and borders open for return flights.
- **Corona:** The 2nd wave of the pandemic hits not only Switzerland but a lot of countries. Most borders stay open, but with quarantine measures. In many hosting countries online schooling, curfews and restricted movements. Masks compulsory.
- **Office:** LE announces stricter hygienic rules (masks inside) and home office again.
Board wishes more direct interaction with staff members, if possible -> Email by LE informing staff that all Board members stand by for direct contacts with the staff, especially in connection with their respective Board Responsibility Areas (BRA).
- **Fundraising:** Finalizations of *Spotlight*, our fall fundraising brochure
- **Finances:** Jürg Neck, one of the four '*senior experts*' has kindly and very generously agreed to be the Board's financial advisor during the crisis. He coaches SW and has weekly finance calls with LE and participates in our Board meetings during the finance agenda points. His expertise is highly appreciated; and we cannot thank Jürg enough for his engagement.

November

The second wave with its restrictions is being felt everywhere, people are starting to feel the loneliness of home office and miss personal contacts; Zoom calls may be very useful but cannot replace face to face talks, especially in stressful situations. In the AFS Network, politics continue to play a big role.

- **Volunteer Training (VT):** planned in-person for 1st weekend in Nov: cancelled because of Covid-restrictions. Online replacement with very few pax despite good program. Our volunteers clearly prefer in-person meetings with a fun-factor.
- **Advent Calendar Project:** One VT group, inspired by Board members Carla and Irène, starts creating an online Advent Calendar. These very dedicated volunteers put energy and creative ideas into the timely realization of the calendar.
- **Office:** Se and Ho staff working hard for the SH cycle. HoFam recruiting difficult. Sending numbers good. LE looks into possibilities to reduce rental costs:

moving to smaller office? Rent reduction by office sharing? Difficult working conditions with short-time work and home office.

- **Network/INT:** letter written by active group of 7 European Chairs to the INT leadership about fee structure and services is approved by the majority of Partners in the Network. Provokes harsh reactions. It is the starting point for further discussions, resulting in reduction of services and re-evaluation of fee structure by INT Admin.
- **INT:** The normal agenda of the Network meeting is split into several online meetings, from end of Oct to Nov. European Chairs meet to prepare questions. At the 'Trustees meet Chairs' call, SW's proposal to intensify dialog between trustees and Chairs leads into quarterly trustee outreach talks with Chairs in small groups.
- **Network:** growing number of POs are forced to hibernate or close business; others face risk of bankruptcy. USA, CAN, CRC, NZL, among others: no SH programs.

December

While the year is coming to an end, Covid-19 is still thriving, vaccinations don't have an impact yet; the outlook into 2021 is glum.

- **Zoom info for Volunteers:** Dec 1st: LE gives overview of situation in SUI: Program numbers in NH20: Hosting from planned 120 pax down to 70. Sending from 190 to 53 pax
SH21: Hosting from planned 34 pax down to 17. Sending from 53 to 31 pax
He also mentions the extra costs and the lower income AFS SUI had to face this year.
- **Office:** Dec 3rd: Zoom contact with Management Team and 3 Board members. Exchange of concerns about financial situation, staff in short-time and home office etc.
- **Finances:** Jürg proposes quarter-end accounts and monitoring of pax, liquidity and reserves on a monthly rather than quarterly base. His assessment: with 220 pax in 2021 and 300 pax in 2022, AFS SUI would barely survive, but with capital debts -> cost cuts are paramount.
Dec 17th: Nice surprise: our losses for 2020 will be considerably lower than forecasted: 'only' 430'000 CHF. 2nd positive message: we received 69'000 CHF from the Lotteriefonds of Kt ZH.
- **Board:** At its meeting of Dec 17th, the Board asks LE to work out 3 budget variations all based on low pax numbers (approximately 220), considering moderate staff reductions in Jan or in Sept or no reductions. A final budget decision will be made in January.
- **Office:** new owners of office offer reduced rent per Dec and maybe shared office space in early 2021. These good news allow us to save resources by staying at Kernstrasse 57.
- **Advent Calendar:** Great thanks for their time and effort to the volunteer workgroup who managed to have their project of the Advent Calendar ready for December 1st. Their reward is a beautiful project! I would like to especially point out Benjamin Schlegel, long-time key volunteer, who invested an incredible amount of time into the technical realization of the videocast. We cannot thank

him enough for his dedication and the great outcome! The Advent Calendar is called '*In 24 days around the world*': Every day a window opened onto stories of Swiss returnees about their experience in their host countries, and their memories of how they had celebrated Christmas there. What a wonderful and positive way to end 2020!

My chronicles of the year 2020 end here; but the Covid-related crisis for AFS Switzerland and the Network has not yet come to an end – alas! The worries of Boards and staff around the world continue in these ongoing uncertain times. Many of our Partner organizations are in survival mode, all of them are still in crisis mode. The same is true for the BoT and the International Administration. The situation in Switzerland is not quite as bad, thanks to the good quality work of our staff and Luc Estapé's constant efforts to secure good Hosting and Sending deals with the Partners, so that our participant numbers are above the Network's average. Still, we depend on the viability of the Network; and it is the duty of the Board to safeguard the survival of our organization through and beyond the Covid-crisis. We do this by closely monitoring the development of the situation and by carefully managing and budgeting our financial resources. In order to be capable of rebounding after the crisis, we need some reserves; we need capital to invest into the future health of AFS Switzerland.

Suzanne Weigelt, Chair of AFS Intercultural Programs, Switzerland