



EDITORIAL

Dear readers,



The nature of honorary roles is undergoing a profound transformation. Societal changes, from demographic pressures and digitalisation to growing professional expectations, mean that such engagement cannot be explained by traditional notions of civic spirit alone. In Switzerland in particular, where federal structures, a dense association landscape and the militia system have historically played a central role, honorary roles are not merely an addition to state provision but a key pillar of social resilience.

As a result, the dimension of personal responsibility gains new weight. An honorary role is not only an expression of solidarity, but also a conscious decision to participate in shaping society. Rather than heroic self-sacrifice, it is about reflective action: what can I contribute? Which role best matches my skills and available resources?

The future of honorary roles depends on whether this new reality can be shaped constructively. This means NPO must establish professional structures without undermining the voluntary nature of engagement. Those involved must also link their motivation with a growing awareness of the commitment such roles require.

Wishing you a pleasant read,

Georg von Schnurbein

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#04/25

ceps

DECEMBER 2025

Philanthropie Aktuell

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Honorary Role

An honorary role is based on the idea of taking on a responsibility “as a matter of honor” rather than for material reward. In this context, it refers to a formalised, typically elected position within an organisation. New data provides insights into key indicators and highlights developments in honorary roles in Switzerland.

By Dr. Oto Potluka

Honorary roles in non-profit organisations (NPO) are one of the cornerstones of social cohesion in Switzerland. The Swiss Volunteering Survey 2025 [1] provides new, up-to-date data offering an in-depth look at recent developments and helping to contextualise findings alongside other key figures. This facilitates a better understanding of their long-term significance.

Engagement in honorary roles

According to data from SAKE and population statistics, the proportion of the population who hold an honorary position in a non-profit organisation in Switzerland has declined over the last 30 years, but has remained stable since 2010 [2]. According to the Swiss Volunteering Survey 2025, the proportion of the population holding at least one honorary role has remained constant at 12% since 2009 (see figure on page 2). At the same time, the non-profit sector appears to have likely grown in recent decades, meaning that the total number of possible positions might have increased [3]. This raises the interesting question of why the proportion of the population in honorary roles has remained constant despite presumably increased opportunities.

Since the relative proportion of the population holding an honorary role has remained constant according to the available data [1], the question arises as to the distribution of this commitment. One possible interpretation is that additional voluntary tasks are increasingly being taken on by people who are already involved in honorary roles. This assumption is supported by earlier surveys [4], according to which some honorary role holders hold several positions at the same time: 21% of honorary role holders hold two positions, and 7% hold three or more. The Swiss Volunteering Survey 2025 [1] also suggests engagement in several areas at the same time.

Honorary role by area

The areas with the most volunteers have long been sports and culture. In both 2020 and 2025, 4% of the population held an honorary role in these areas [1, 4]. This is followed by games, hobbies and leisure, and social activities, each accounting for around 2% of the population. There were slight shifts between the areas (e.g. an influx of people into organisations in the cultural sector or a decline in the hobby sector), but overall the ratios remained very similar [1, 4].

Honorary role and demography

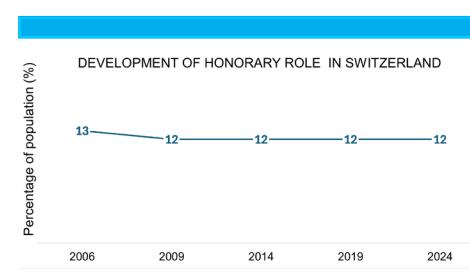
With regard to demographic trends, it should be noted that men still tend to be overrepresented in honorary roles. However, women now account for slightly more than a third [1, 4]. This is consistent with our finding that women make up 30.6% of foundation board members. Conversely, women are significantly more likely to participate in voluntary work outside of associations or organisations. There are also clear age-related differences: younger people are relatively less likely to hold honorary roles [1].

The data also show that honorary roles are often recruited from among the more highly educated population [1, 4]. Since 2020, a slight shift has been noticeable: the proportion of people with higher technical or university education has increased, while the groups with lower levels of education have become

slightly smaller. One possible explanation for this trend may be the increasing professionalisation of many NPO, which entails higher technical requirements and thus tends to appeal to or require people with a higher education-level. It is also notable that Swiss citizenship remains a strong predictor of being appointed to an honorary role, which suggests that the entry threshold is comparatively high.

The future of the honorary role

If a growing proportion of honorary duties are carried out by the same people, there is an increased risk of insidious overload. To prevent this, approaches are needed that lower entry barriers while remaining compatible with the responsibilities of the role. At the same time, it must remain clear that an honorary role entails responsibility. It is precisely this balancing act between openness and commitment that is crucial for the future of honorary roles.



Source: Swiss Volunteering Survey 2025, p. 29

Dr. Oto Potluka

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References

1. Fischer, A., M. Lamprecht, and H. Stamm, Freiwilligen-Monitor Schweiz 2025. Zürich: Seismo Verlag.
2. Freiwilligen-Monitor Schweiz 2020 – Factsheets: Ehrenamtliche in Vereinen und Organisationen.
3. NPO Data Lab, Zeitreihenanalyse zur jährlichen Entwicklung. 2025.
4. Lamprecht, M., A. Fischer, and H. Stamm, Freiwilligen-Monitor Schweiz 2020. Zürich: Seismo Verlag.

Engagement in transition: How can honorary roles remain attractive?

Switzerland is a country of associations – around 100'000 of which shape public life. Many non-profit organisations (NPO) are also organised as associations. They play a vital role in community life, integrating people, promoting social and environmental causes, and strengthening solidarity and democracy in Switzerland.

Associations thrive on civic engagement. This accompanies us from the cradle to the grave: from parental counselling to youth clubs, apprenticeship exchanges and crematorium associations. Even if we do not get involved ourselves, we all benefit from it. Civic engagement is the glue that holds our society together.

responsibility and stability are extremely important. There is no universal or instant solution to this problem. Nevertheless, civil society organisations can take steps to make themselves attractive to volunteers and honorary roles:

1. Making engagement opportunities visible:

If a potential commitment is easily accessible and clearly formulated, the inhibition threshold remains low. Digital networking platforms can help in this regard.

2. Creating favourable conditions:

Tasks and responsibilities should be clearly defined. The organisation takes care of expenses and insurance, further training and proof of commitment. This shows appreciation for the committed person.

3. Show the impact of the operations:

Committed individuals want to know why their involvement is important. This means formulating arguments for involvement, demonstrating the impact of involvement, and clearly communicating the organisation's goals and purpose.

4. Relinquishing responsibility:

Together we can achieve more. Trust and support are desired instead of «command and control».

5. Start small:

It is worthwhile recruiting people for short-term assignments rather than asking them directly to take on official roles. This allows them to experience the organisation and makes it easier to approach them later for a more significant commitment.

6. Creating new forms of participation:

When tasks are divided into manageable chunks, this creates a «buffet» of very different opportunities for involvement, from which interested parties can help themselves.

7. Volunteer coordinator / Introduce volunteer database:

Those who actively evaluate and document voluntary work find it easier to identify which volunteers have untapped potential.

Fanni Dahinden

The „Fachstelle vitamin B“ supports honorary board members by providing information, further training and advice. www.vitaminb.ch

«An honorary role is fulfilling, broadens horizons and gives meaning»

Interview with Sabine Fürbringer, member of the board of trustees of the Salvation Army Switzerland Foundation

CEPS: How did you get involved in your honorary role?

S.F.: As often happens, I was asked to help. Over the past 15 years or so, I have come into contact with various Salvation Army officers through coaching relationships. This allowed me to get to know the organisation better, and I was impressed by the work this NPO does at the ecclesiastical and social level. This led to collaboration on various projects related to leadership issues from a women's perspective (the Salvation Army is one of the pioneers of equality, having campaigned for women's suffrage in England, for example, right from its inception). As the foundation's regulations explicitly require that three to five seats be filled by external persons who are not employed by or members of The Salvation Army, I came onto their radar four years ago.



Sabine Fürbringer
is a psychologist lic.phil. FSP with her own practice and works part-time as a couples therapist at the Psychotherapeutic Centre of the University of Zurich.

CEPS: How do you find a suitable honorary role?

S.F.: I am now serving my second term on the foundation board. In both cases, I see two essential components. The first is an inner connection to the purpose, the subject matter, the social cause that an organisation represents. An honorary role is a matter close to the heart, so there needs to be a resonance on this level. Then there is the relational connection. As a rule, you naturally form a network with people who pursue similar causes, read publications and continue your education. Whether someone hears about an interesting task in this way and actively applies for a position or, like me, is asked to do so, is probably less important.

CEPS: Were there any experiences or moments that surprised you?

S.F.: After gaining initial experience over ten years in a smaller foundation – which I found to be an ideal start – I now find myself in a different role. I went through an application process with clear requirements that I had to be willing and able to fulfil. My application was also sent to the international headquarters in London, which was quite special. I always find it amusing to talk to people who only know The Salvation Army from the collection pots. They are quite astonished when they realise how diverse, large-scale and professional The Salvation Army's presence is in social hotspots.

CEPS: What do you feel has had a particularly formative influence on your commitment?

S.F.: Our eleven-member committee is mixed in terms of age, we have a balanced male-female ratio, we bring different professional and personal backgrounds to the table, we overcome the Röstigraben and, in addition to a strong national perspective, we also have an international dimension. This diversity is reflected not only in the Foundation Board itself, but also in the agenda items to be dealt with. Good governance is a high priority. In order to do justice to the size of the organisation, we have introduced sub-committees, for example. The fact that we treat each other in a very friendly and approachable manner makes the meetings days that I really look forward to.

CEPS: What does it take (apart from time) to do an honorary role?

S.F.: Of course, time is a key factor. You have to be prepared to set aside time for additional meetings or more intensive discussion of a topic, if necessary, in addition to the foreseeable workload. A certain amount of flexibility in your own daily work routine also helps, especially when it comes to giving an opinion at short notice or incorporating a smaller task. You also need to enjoy learning, whether through targeted further training – something that the Salvation Army explicitly encourages – or familiarisation with a subject area that is still unfamiliar to you. Of course, finances are a big issue. You also need the ability to keep an eye on the overall context, to think in a networked way and to have a strategic focus.

The interplay between operational and strategic leadership sometimes requires tact and sensitivity.

CEPS: What advice would you give to someone considering taking on an honorary role?

S.F.: First, examine your own motivation: does something resonate within you, is it an issue that is genuinely important to you? Then I would recommend asking exactly what the expectations and requirements are. I would gather information about the organisation – can I identify with the way it works, its values and culture, what is its financial situation, to what extent will my specific contribution be an asset to the organisation, how diverse is the committee? If there are lots of green lights: Go for it! Women in particular, myself included, sometimes hold back because they think they don't measure up in all respects. But a position like this is a place where you can learn and don't have to know everything already. And it's a fulfilling, horizon-broadening, meaningful task – the benefit to your own life satisfaction should not be underestimated.

CEPS: Thank you very much!

CEPS INSIGHT

Team expansion

We are delighted to welcome two new team members. Feyza Yildiz and Jan Studinger will be strengthening CEPS in research support and continuing education administration.

<https://ceps.unibas.ch/en/about-us/team/>

Conferences

CEPS strengthened its international networking and research through active participation in, among other things, the ERNOP, EUR-NOVA & ARNOVA conferences.

Publications

With numerous scientific articles, book chapters and other publications, CEPS contributes to the advancement of research.

<https://ceps.unibas.ch/de/publikationen/publikationen-uebersicht/>

Liability in honorary roles – what you need to know

People who take on an honorary role on the board of a foundation or association usually do so for personal reasons and to serve a good cause. Despite the often unpaid nature of the role, it is still an official function with a high level of legal responsibility.

Responsibility should not deter you from accepting an honorary role. At the same time, it is important to find out about the organisation and the duties associated with the role before taking office. It is also important to keep up to date with the current compliance rules, supervisory practices and legal requirements during your honorary role.

Foundation board members and association executives must carefully manage organisational assets, uphold the organisation's purpose, control risks, and structure and manage the organisation appropriately. Personal liability may arise, for example, if duties of care and supervision are breached, laws or statutes are disregarded, or if a lack of organisation or inaction in the face of obvious risks leads to damage.

That is why it is important to exercise good governance while in office. The principles of the Swiss Foundation Code or ZEWO, for example, provide good guidance for acting with due care. And those who act with due care, actively manage risks and ensure a sound organisation not only protect themselves, but also

strengthen the credibility and effectiveness of the foundation or association in the long term.

The CAS Nonprofit Governance & Leadership programme provides a valuable learning opportunity to gain insight into governance issues and the legal framework for managing non-profit organisations. Consisting of three modules, the course involves 11 days of classroom teaching and begins in April 2026.

Dr. Elisabeth Hasse

More on the CAS Nonprofit Governance & Leadership:
<https://ceps.unibas.ch/de/cas-nonprofit-governance-leadership/>

NUMBER OF THE QUARTER 532

The „Jahrbuch der Hilfswerke 2025“ has been published. It analyses 532 annual financial statements from predominantly Zewo-certified NPO in Switzerland. It provides a broad overview of financial and other key figures for donation-funded NPO in Switzerland.

Download the Jahrbuch der Hilfswerke 2025 here:
<https://ceps.unibas.ch/de/publikationen/#c1163>

CALENDAR

Executive Education:

CAS Nonprofit & Public Management

4 Module – Gunten & Basel
Start: 5 January 2026

Gute Gesuche stellen 2026

Praxisseminar Bereiche Kultur und Nonprofit
Start: 27 January 2026

Intensiv-Lehrgang Stiftungsmanagement

Sigriswil
02 - 06 March 2026

CAS Nonprofit Governance & Leadership

3 Module – Sigriswil & Basel
Start: 13 April 2026

MAS/DAS in Nonprofit Management & Law

Start at any time
[Register Now -> CEPS Executive Education](https://ceps.unibas.ch/de/ceps-executive-education/)

FURTHER DATES

9. Basler Stiftungsrechtstag CEPS & Faculty of Law, University of Basel

12 February 2026

UPRUN Conference 2026 Technische Universität Dortmund

24 - 26 March 2026

Philea Forum 2026

Philea
18 - 21 May 2026, Copenhagen

Deutscher Stiftungstag 2026

Bundesverband deutscher Stiftungen
21 - 22 May 2026, Hamburg

Forum des Fondations SwissFoundations

11 June 2026, Lausanne

Gutes tun von Anfang an

This new book is ideal for helping people get started in an NPO leadership role, and it provides guidance on how to do so.



Succession in the foundation board and executive board is one of the biggest challenges for NPO. Gutes tun von Anfang an is a compact and inspiring introductory work written in German for anyone taking on responsibility in an NPO.

In easily understandable chapters, Georg von Schnurbein and Robert Schmuki convey what NPO leadership is all about today: rising expectations and professional structures, while maintaining an unwavering focus on the charitable purpose. The book impresses with its clear language, numerous practical examples, and a well-thought-out structure, which is divided into three sections: knowledge, understanding and action. The combination of idealism and professionalism is particularly valuable, offering guidance to newcomers, career changers and committed leaders. Gutes tun von Anfang an is a motivating companion for anyone who wants to make an impact in the NPO world and combine responsibility with meaning.

Order the book Gutes tun von Anfang an here:
<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-658-49594-7>

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LAYOUT & PICTURES

a+ GmbH
 © Pixabay © CEPS 2025
 Translation with the assistance of DeepL

Available online:
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