

Postcard from SRI in Switzerland - where the money is

by Robert Klijn on SRI-CONNECT

Three things strike a foreigner about SRI in Switzerland:

- The infrastructure for Sustainable Finance and the innovation that this supports
- The rivalry between Zurich and Geneva
- The fact that quality is sought and rewarded

Infrastructure

I first visited Geneva in 2007 to attend the annual conference of the Global Compact financial sector initiative “Who cares wins”. The [Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs](#) supported the initiative. My regular visits to Zurich started in May 2010 when I approached RepRisk AG and became their sales representative. RepRisk is one of many Swiss SRI data provider start-ups. Other examples are Asset4, Covalence and Inrate. One catalyst for all of this activity was the foundation of Sustainable Asset Management (now RobecoSAM) in 1995 as the world's first asset manager focusing exclusively on SRI.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Switzerland has been a hotbed of SRI development for over a decade. The demand is there and governmental bodies – both national and intergovernmental – have been willing to support this development.

Rivalry

The second thing to note is that there is still a pretty strong rivalry between Zürich and Geneva.

- Geneva hosts many [international organisations](#) from the United Nations, like [UNCTAD](#) and [ILO](#), that promote sustainability. [Sustainable Finance Geneva](#) promotes sustainability and responsibility within the Geneva financial community. It has a [LinkedIn discussion group](#) of almost 600 members.
- [The Sustainability Forum Zürich](#) is another well-known organisation that seeks to contribute to sustainable business in the dynamics of globalisation by promoting forecast, reflection and action in and through the financial markets and its key players. The Canton of Zürich and the City of Zürich are members.
- Also Zurich hosts [Green Buzz](#) which is a perpetual series of gatherings launched early 2010 in Zurich. It has more than 800 sustainability professionals across all industries and sectors, scientists, entrepreneurs and politicians. I had great fun visiting a couple of their events. These are hosted in collaboration with sustainability-related firms, NGOs and academic institutions.

Quality

Finally, the Swiss interest in quality is important. In Switzerland, the bakery is able to make a decent living, because people are willing to pay for a good sandwich. Women dislike buying things in the

sales, because they do not want to wear what other women do not want to buy. A conference without an entrance fee is perceived as low quality.

See you soon...

Swiss SRI had a relatively high exposure to clean tech and thematic investments and therefore suffered somewhat during the early stages of the credit crisis. However, the factors above, in my opinion, combine to make Switzerland a long-term attractive market for SRI investors and companies.

So, I'll be back soon:

- On July 4, I will organise a road show for **GRESB** (The Global Real Estate Sustainability Benchmark) and
- On July 5, I will organise the **RICA conference** (Responsible Investment Corporate Access) – with speakers from Roche, SAP, Henkel, Corio and a number of investment institutions
All-in-all, I like working with the Swiss. They do have their own sense of humour. Most are conservative when it comes down to investments, but that's probably why Switzerland still is the country where the money is. See you soon...
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