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2000 farms disappear every year

SWISS FARMERS ARE WORRIED: THEY FEAR FOR THEIR OWN EXISTENCE. This is why more than 10,000 farmers from all corners of Switzerland gathered on Berne's Bundesplatz to demonstrate against "current developments in agricultural policy." Farmers fear a reduction in subsidies and competition from cheap, foreign agricultural products. As the President of the Swiss Farmers' Union dramatically portrayed the situation, many farmers are already living off their savings.

The statistics are hard to believe: Every year, 2,000 farms go to the wall: that's five every day. Whereas in 1990 there were 93,000 going agricultural concerns, last year there were only 65,000. At the same time the number of farmworkers dropped from 253,000 to 190,000. And there's no end in sight: the 2011 agricultural reform will result in the disappearance of between five and ten farms every day.

Swiss farmers receive CHF 4 billion in federal subsidies every year. "Too much," say trade associations, economists and politicians who are calling for structural changes or, in other words, fewer but larger operations that can produce as cheaply as their competitors in the USA or the EU. As our feature article illustrates, however, it's not as easy as it sounds. Moreover, farmers have an important function to fulfil as landscape gardeners.

The increase in poverty and related welfare services are continually the subject of political debate. In an interview with the "Swiss Review", Walter Schmid, Director of the University of Social Work and President of the Swiss Conference for Social Welfare, outlined an effective way of alleviating poverty in Switzerland.

Having been in charge of the Youth and Social Services Office of the City of Zurich for many years, he is well acquainted with the subject. First and foremost he calls for supplementary benefits for young families, to ensure that their children can be raised and educated properly, as well as for working people with incomes below subsistence level. In Schmid's opinion it is shameful that, in this day and age, a country as affluent as Switzerland still has people working for pay that does not even cover the costs of daily living. Schmid also criticises the fact that Switzerland's social policy suffers from an "intellectual straightjacket" that prevents the development of modern, effective welfare solutions.

A Swiss film has also become a hot topic recently. Thousands of people have been flocking to cinemas to see "Grounding", the partly fictional, partly documentary account of the final days of Swissair. Controversial discussions have been triggered by Michael Steiner's film, which blames banking giant UBS and its CEO Marcel Ospel for Swissair's grounding and presents Mario Corti, Swissair's last CEO, with a clean slate. Thanks to Michael Steiner, the Swiss film industry is experiencing a revival. Coming on the heels of the highly-acclaimed "Mein Name ist Eugen", "Grounding" is Steiner's second big box-office hit. Who is this director who has given Swiss cinema its two biggest hits in recent years? Alain Wey portrays this 36-year-old native of Zurich and takes the opportunity to chat with Michael Steiner about his new projects. His conclusion: Having overcome its agonies, the Swiss film industry is experiencing a new lease of life and is now producing such high quality works that it once more has the chance to gain international recognition.

HEINZ ECKERT

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Cover photo: Renzo Blumenthal – Organic farmer and Mister Switzerland 2005: A symbol for modern agriculture. Photo: Keystone

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