

# White paper: Founding the Social Sciences and Humanities Open Cluster (SSCHOC-CH) in Switzerland

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## 1. Introduction

Addressing societal and cultural challenges is pivotal for the development and well-being of communities around the globe. These challenges, ranging from social inequality and cultural conflicts to environmental sustainability and digital transformation, have profound implications for the fabric of society. The importance of tackling these issues lies not only in resolving immediate problems but also in shaping a future that is inclusive, resilient, and informed by a deep understanding of human behaviour and culture, history, and values. In this context, social sciences and humanities infrastructures play a crucial role in facilitating research that can guide policy, foster social cohesion, and promote cultural understanding.

Research infrastructures are facilities, resources, and services that are used by the scientific community to conduct research and foster innovation in their fields. They can range from large-scale equipment, such as particle accelerators and telescopes, to distributed networks that collect or preserve data. Early infrastructures already built many hundred years ago were libraries, providing scholars access to vast amounts of written knowledge. The establishment of special research laboratories, telescopes and research institutes that were used by different researchers in the 19th and early 20th centuries marked a significant step forward in developing some scientific fields in a more coordinated way. Later developments from the second of the 20<sup>th</sup> century include large scale facilities like Synchrotrons and Neutron Sources, the creation of biobanks but also the establishment of large distributed data collection or network of existing resources to create, store or share information and data. In the social sciences and humanities these infrastructures focus on facilitating access to data and information (such as CESSD, CLARIN or DARIAH), collecting data across countries and time (for example through ESS, SHARE or GGP) and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and networks. International research infrastructures exist alongside national facilities.

## 2. The European context

The *Social Sciences and Humanities Open Cloud*, short SSHOC,<sup>1</sup> was initiated as part of the European Union's Horizon 2020 program targeted at forming clusters in all domains. A stronger emphasis on coordination was driven by funders and policy makers because of the growing importance and also the growing number of research infrastructure. The formation of such clusters should ensure that existing resources and tools are interconnected and that existing infrastructures identify and create synergies in order to avoid costly parallel and uncoordinated developments.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sshopencloud.eu/>

Recognizing the fragmented nature of data and research tools across the social sciences and humanities, the Horizon 2020 program sought to create a more cohesive and accessible digital research infrastructure environment. Launched in 2019, SSHOC was designed to bring together existing and new research infrastructures to create a cloud-based, open-access environment for researchers. The initial consortium behind SSHOC includes a wide range of European research infrastructures, libraries, archives, and data centers. The project aimed to integrate these disparate resources, ensuring that they are interoperable, user-friendly, and aligned with the FAIR principles (Findability, Accessibility, Interoperability, and Reusability).

After the end of the project in 2022, SSHOC was transformed into a permanent organisation mainly around the ESFRI Landmarks and ESFRI Projects with a new governing board, which is called *SSH Open Cluster*. The main objective of the collaboration is the need for continued efforts to ensure the sustainability of the SSH Open Marketplace developed under SSHOC as well as the SSH research infrastructure network. SSHOC together with the clusters from other domains are also foreseen to play a pivotal role in the EOSC governance framework. Acknowledging the relevance of the clusters, the OSCARS<sup>2</sup> project was launched within Horizon Europe in order to consolidate past achievements of the Science Clusters into lasting interdisciplinary FAIR data services and working practices.

Research infrastructures do not exist only at the European or international level, many infrastructures are national and many of the European infrastructures have national nodes. Hence, a need for stronger coordination and the need to make existing resources interoperable and reusable was also identified at the national level. Pioneering developments are in the Netherlands, where SSHOC-NL was created as an umbrella organization of existing social science and humanities infrastructures in 2023. Substantial funds are provided in this cluster project in order to “increase interoperability across the domain and allow services, data and tools to be shared, linked, and combined [...]”. SSHOC-NL will elevate existing services, data and tools through technological and stakeholder readiness levels and ensure that they are mature, stable and widely accessible to the research community at large.”<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The Swiss context

A number of SSH infrastructures in Switzerland exist. Some infrastructures are funded through the Suisse Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences (SAHSS).<sup>4</sup> For instance, the *Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland* Dodis research centre is an institute of the SAHSS, known as a centre of excellence for studies in the history of Swiss foreign policy, Dodis conducts basic research on the contemporary history of Switzerland since 1848. Others are funded through the Swiss National Science foundation<sup>5</sup>. Also some larger facilities exist. The *Swiss Center for Expertise in Social Sciences* FORS was founded as a social sciences “infrastructure for infrastructures” in 2008 with the purpose of uniting various long-term projects under one roof. FORS hosts various national survey data collections, the Swiss nodes of European projects as well as the national social science data archive. In 2017, the *Swiss National Data and Service Center for the Humanities* DaSCH was established as a national facility with the mission to develop and operate a FAIR enabling trusted digital repository for open research data in the humanities and to provide long-term direct access to data, enable their continuous editing and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://oscars-project.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://zenodo.org/records/7645356>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sagw.ch/sagw/forschungsinfrastrukturen>

<sup>5</sup> See under “Infrastructure” in the SNF grants database: <https://data.snf.ch/grants>

allow for citation of single objects within a dataset. Finally, the *Linguistic Research Infrastructure* LiRI was created and founded by the University of Zürich in 2018 as a technology platform to support research in linguistics, language science, and related disciplines at the University of Zurich and beyond.

### 3.1. The Swiss Roadmap process

Switzerland has developed a centralised national roadmap process for infrastructures, leaning on the similar process for strategic prioritisation for European wide infrastructures, the ESFRI<sup>6</sup> roadmap process. The Swiss Roadmap process is an instrument to plan, prioritise, and coordinate at the national level the benefits of maintaining or developing existing national infrastructures, of creating new infrastructures and of allowing Switzerland's participation in international research infrastructures. SERI coordinates the process for drawing up the Roadmap in conformity with the Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation (RIPA).

The roadmap has two main components:

1. the development of new national infrastructures
2. Swiss participation in international RIs

While DaSCH and FORS were included in the 2015 Roadmaps, LiRI in the 2019 Roadmap, in the 2023 roadmap no new SSH research infrastructure was listed. Indeed, a call for both national and Swiss participation in international RIs was published in 2021. For new national infrastructures, the proposal had to come from a higher education institution; institutions like FORS or DaSCH were not allowed to submit projects unless in partnership with higher education institutions. For unknown reasons, no new SSH project made it to the evaluation phase.

Regarding the Swiss participation in international RIs, Swiss national infrastructures play a significant role as nodes of the European ESFRI Landmarks, which are CESSDA ERIC, CLARIN ERIC, DARIAH ERIC, ESS ERIC as well as SHARE ERIC. While three of these nodes are attached to FORS (CESSDA and ESS) and the University of Lausanne (SHARE), the coordination of DARIAH is attached to DaSCH and that of CLARIN to LiRI. DARIAH-CH was included in the 2019 Roadmap whereas CLARIN-CH in the 2023 Roadmap. From the start, questions were raised about how the existing nodes are funded and governed. In addition, Switzerland did not at that time allow for full membership in ERICs, Switzerland only had an observer status, which limited the possible involvement. The first exchanges therefore also focused on how to contribute to the discussion on creating the legal basis for Switzerland to become a full member of ERICs. This was achieved in 2022, when the Swiss parliament approved the Swiss membership in six ERICs (among them CESSDA ERIC and DARIAH ERIC) and created at the same time the legal conditions for Switzerland to become full member in other ERICs in the future.

### 3.2. The Swiss National Open Research Data Strategy

A more recent player in the Swiss context of research infrastructures is the Swiss National Open Research Data (ORD) Strategy (launched in July 2021), which is also a centralised approach to planning and prioritising research infrastructures. The Swiss ORD Strategy aims to promote open research data practices in Switzerland. This collaborative effort involves four key national education, research, and innovation (ERI) actors: the ETH Domain, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, the Swiss National Science Foundation, and swissuniversities. The strategy is designed to facilitate the sharing and accessibility of research data across different disciplines and institutions through strategic coordination, consolidation of the ORD landscape, and collaborative efforts among key stakeholders.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.esfri.eu/esfri-roadmap>

To implement this strategy effectively, an Action Plan was devised in January 2022, outlining specific actions and areas of focus related to (A) supporting researchers and research communities in imagining and adopting ORD practices, (B) developing, promoting, and maintaining financially sustainable basic infrastructures and services for all researchers, (C) equipping researchers for ORD skills development and exchange of best practices, (D) building up systemic and supportive conditions for institutions and research communities. The Action Plan also established the National ORD Strategy Council (StraCo) – as a central governing body responsible for coordinating ORD efforts among ERI actors and representing their collective interests – supported by the Sounding Board Researchers and the Sounding Board Service Providers<sup>7</sup>.

One of the core components of the strategy is the Blueprint Process, developed by StraCo. This process involves identifying disciplinary clusters within the ORD ecosystem that require targeted action. Task Forces are then formed to conduct detailed analyses of each cluster, leading to the development of strategic options for integration into the Blueprint. The Blueprint serves as a guiding framework for long-term planning and informs funding decisions.

Clusters are defined as data- or discipline-specific areas where dynamic ORD development occurs, involving multiple national and international actors, necessitating strategic coordination, and hosting infrastructures of national significance. Initial clusters identified for investigation include Health and life science, Social sciences and humanities, and Data science. Task Forces are assigned to each cluster, responsible for conducting thorough analyses to explore strategic options and formulate the Blueprint for further coordination and consolidation. Regular updates and extensions to these cluster analyses ensure they remain accurate and reflective of evolving developments.

### 3.3. The “SSH RIs in Switzerland” initiative

In the last Swiss roadmaps published in 2019 and 2023, research infrastructure needs of the SSH community were hardly recognised and SSH projects were in a weak position throughout the entire process. This led to two conferences with representatives of SSH projects and infrastructures as well as other stakeholders coming together in 2022 and 2023 and the publication of a “Position paper: Social sciences and humanities research infrastructures in Switzerland” that was signed by about 150 researchers in Switzerland and submitted to the Swiss ERI actors.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this paper was to raise awareness and stimulate a discussion on the current situation of social sciences and humanities research infrastructures in Switzerland, the Swiss roadmap process, and possible improvements of the way in which research infrastructures are prioritised and funded in the future.

One of the outcomes of this discussion and a conclusion of the paper was also, that “existing and future SSH infrastructure projects in Switzerland should showcase how they collaborate and create synergies within the SSH domain but also with RIs in other domains. Like cluster projects at the European Level, in the SSH domain through the SSHOC project, SSH RIs should form clusters as well and establish forms of coordination. RIs usually have a unique relevance to advance research in one research community. However, RIs especially need to cooperate in the establishment of digital and technical tools for data creation and preservation as well as analytical tools for the exploration of data and information. Infrastructure should also coordinate in training and education, which are key aspects of the activities for SSH infrastructures. Newly proposed projects and RIs need to make sure that they have adapted governance and funding models and that they are well linked and coordinated with existing RIs in order to create synergies and avoid the duplication of efforts.”

<sup>7</sup> <https://openresearchdata.swiss/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dariah.ch/ssh-ris-switzerland>

In a follow up meeting in autumn 2023, a group of representatives from national infrastructures and the Swiss nodes of ERIC decided to go ahead with the creation of SSHOC Switzerland, a coordination group was formed with the task to prepare for the foundation of the Swiss SSH Open Cluster.

## 4. The Swiss SSH Open Cluster - SSHOC-CH

The Swiss SSH Open Cluster, i.e. SSHOC-CH, is the **cluster of existing national infrastructures as well as the national nodes of ESFRI roadmap projects** with an interest of Swiss participation. SSHOC-CH is aimed to include all RIs funded through the SNF infrastructure funding line<sup>9</sup>, the projects in the SAHSS domain<sup>10</sup> and also projects listed on the national RI roadmaps<sup>11</sup> as well as other emerging infrastructures that wish to join SSHOC-CH. The cluster is open to everybody beyond that list of projects that adheres to the general mission of SSHOC-CH:

### Mission

*Create a cluster of social science and humanities research infrastructures in Switzerland (national infrastructures and national nodes of international infrastructures) in order to ensure the exchange and cooperation of research infrastructures to support research projects and researchers, to identify and create synergies and, where possible, to develop joint platforms and services or make existing ones interoperable.*

*SSHOC provides a framework for new research infrastructures. SSHOC-CH establishes the link to SSHOC at European level and to other national clusters. Through cooperation and support, SSHOC complements existing infrastructures and their activities, which are represented by a member of the SSHOC-CH association. (See SSHOC-CH Statutes)*

To have this openness is also feasible because the definition of what constitutes an infrastructure and what not is far from precise and no comprehensive and complete overview.

### 4.1. Objectives

SSHOC-CH has two main objectives: to **find synergies** and **foster collaborations** between social sciences and humanities infrastructures, as well as to **ensure coordination** of national infrastructures and expertise in order to support scholars from social sciences and humanities in their research and in managing their data in the spirit of Open Science and FAIR principles. The added value of SSHOC-CH comes from the willingness among the members of the SSHOC-CH community to cooperate. As such, SSHOC-CH does not establish a singular SSH infrastructure or channel infrastructure funding through a new organisation, but it supports existing infrastructures and provides an appropriate formal framework for cooperation and building new infrastructures to answer the needs of the entire SSH community.

More specifically SSHOC-CH aims in a bottom-up approach at:

- *Contributing to the national policy dialogue in a coordinated way on key topics relevant for the SSH research infrastructure community.* This includes developing and consolidating policy positions to ongoing debates from an SSH perspective on infrastructure prioritisation processes through the national research infrastructure roadmap process and also to ongoing discussion on funding and governance of research infrastructures and on ORD strategy more generally. Having

<sup>9</sup> "Infrastructures" in the SNF grants database: <https://data.snf.ch/grants>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sagw.ch/sagw/forschungsinfrastrukturen>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.sbf.admin.ch/sbfi/de/home/forschung-und-innovation/forschung-und-innovation-in-der-schweiz/schweizer-roadmap-fuer-forschungsinfrastrukturen.html>



joint positions as well as participating in the dialogue jointly should increase the chance that SSH research infrastructure needs are better recognised in Switzerland.

- *Developing joint policies from a SSH perspective especially on data management and sharing.* Developing and promoting best practices for data management and sharing, in line with FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Re-usable) as well as developing and disseminating guidelines on ethical issues and data protection standards relevant to SSH research may be done within SSHOC-CH in the future. This includes addressing challenges related to sensitive data, copyright protected data and ensuring compliance with national and international regulations.
- *Creating an overview of existing projects, resources and facilities* available for the SSH community, identifying gaps as well as monitoring new developments that may need to be addressed in the future. Such a landscape analysis – using the term of ESFRI – is currently initiated from the ORD Strategy Council for data infrastructures for the social sciences and humanities, however such a top-down approach may also be complemented with a more bottom-up approach coming from the community itself that also has a broader focus on research infrastructures beyond pure data infrastructures.
- *Identifying and creating synergies between existing research infrastructures.* Developing tools and platforms but also offering services are costly. While existing research infrastructures provide a multitude of resources to the SSH community already, identifying and developing synergies for Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) infrastructures is crucial because it enhances research quality, efficiency, and impact. By leveraging shared resources, methodologies, and data, SSH infrastructures can overcome disciplinary silos, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation. Creating interoperability between existing data and information sources enable researchers to tackle complex societal challenges that require multifaceted perspectives, combining insights from sociology, history, economics, and beyond. This collaborative approach maximises the use of limited resources, avoiding duplication of efforts and facilitating a more cost-effective allocation of funding. Moreover, it enriches the research environment, providing scholars with access to a broader array of tools, datasets, and expertise. The development of synergies among SSH infrastructures is a strategic imperative for advancing the social sciences and humanities.
- *Reaching a critical mass.* Many SSH infrastructures are relatively small, which creates challenges for sustainability but also for managing larger developments that require substantial resources and a variety of skills. In such cases pooling of resources may be a way out of this dilemma. Pooling of resources may also be necessary to overcome the obstacles that projects need to have a certain financial volume in order to be eligible in the national roadmap process (in the 2023 roadmap process, a minimum of 4 Mio. CHF was required to be recognised).
- *Participating in funding calls.* There are different calls dedicated to research infrastructures, for example through swissuniversities' ORD action plan, and SSHOC Switzerland could serve as a platform to exchange on the calls and participate in calls in a more coordinated and strategic way. Typically not SSHOC would be a partner in such calls, but the different infrastructures.
- *Carry out community engagement and outreach actions.* Engaging with the broader SSH community to gather input on their needs and to promote the adoption of SSHOC services and resources. This may include organising events, participating in conferences, and conducting outreach to academic institutions and research groups.

- *Coordinating Training and Support.* Offering training programs, workshops, and support services to researchers, librarians, and data managers on topics such as data management, open science practices, and the use of digital tools in SSH research.

## 4.2 Creation of the SSHOC-CH Association

The coordination group proposes as a way forward to **establish SSHOC-CH as a non-profit association**. Members may be individuals representing national SSH infrastructures, as well as researchers. Most infrastructures are not independent legal entities, they are embedded in existing higher education institutions and they can therefore formally not commit to be represented without the agreement of the respective bodies. Having individuals as members also allows for openness and broad inclusion of the community interested in bringing SSH infrastructures forward through SSHOC-CH.

The **governance** of the association is as follows:

- The **assembly of members** is the highest body of SSHOC-CH with all decision making power, including electing;
- **a board**, consisting of 5-8 members, with the responsibility to ensure the day to day functioning of SSHOC-CH and the task to represent the organisation towards the outside.

The assembly or the board can install additional commissions or working groups.

**Funding** shall be limited to small annual membership fees, given that SSHOC is mainly a coordinating organisation and all infrastructure related activities remain with existing SSH infrastructures. SSHOC, however, may participate in funding applications that are relevant for the entire SSH RI community or that involves several existing SSH infrastructures. Those activities should not be in competition with the activities of existing SSH RIs.

The following **next concrete steps** are foreseen:

- 24. April 2024: Formally create the SSHOC-CH Associate and establish an executive board.
- Spring 2024: Call for membership in SSHOC-CH.
- During 2024 the executive board shall: (i) provide a website, the sshoc.ch domain being reserved, announce and promote SSHOC to key ERI stakeholders, (ii) propose priorities and a work plan on behalf of the next general assembly, and (iii) establish a newsletter.

This white paper has been written by Noah Bubenhofer (LIRI), Cristina Grisot (CLARIN-CH and DARIAH-CH), Georg Lutz (FORS and CESSDA), Stephanie Steinmetz (UNIL and GGP) and Sacha Zala (Dodis) in March 2024. The draft is open for consultation and feedback until April 20, 2024. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to [cristina.grisot@uzh.ch](mailto:cristina.grisot@uzh.ch) until April 20, 2024.