

# Kenyan soils, football and service that makes sense

## A Social Service Volunteer talks about us – and other topics

**Why do young Swiss choose social service\* instead of the army? And why at the Syngenta Foundation? What do they do here? What's it like? Samuel Steiner knows first-hand. But he told us more than just that... The interviewer was our commercial apprentice, Duygu Kilic.**

*Duygu Kilic: Lots of Swiss men see work in the social sector as a preferable alternative to military service. What prompted you to make this choice?*



**Samuel Steiner:** In my opinion social service offers more benefits than military service, to both the individual and the country. There are lots of interesting positions available, which makes it a great option for everybody who gets called up. You can learn a lot, and gain insights into professional fields that might otherwise be hard to access. So for me the choice was clear: social service.

*And why do other young men agree?*

I think their reasons are similar. They see that there are many attractive jobs in this area. To some extent, pacifism and aversion to violence may also be contributing factors.

*The Swiss army is running short of staff. So the Federal Council (= government) would like to make social service less attractive. The length of service has already increased, and further measures are under discussion. How do you see all this?*

I think it's unfortunate, as it gives the impression that social service is less valuable than military service. In my opinion the reverse is true. The punitive additional service days are unjustified – they are just a way of coercing more people to join the military. Politicians should take a different approach, and make military service more attractive, not civil national service less so!

*Don't you think that trained soldiers are essential in the event of a national emergency?*

It's an appealing fantasy to imagine a world in which peace prevails, and military forces are unnecessary. However, the real world is different. The military needs well-trained specialists. So why not create a purely professional army with the best people for the job? I suspect that a militia army in which soldiers only serve for three weeks a year after basic training would not be sufficiently effective in an emergency. So I would argue for a professional army.

*Where did you get the idea of doing national service with the Syngenta Foundation (SFSA)? Had you come across the Foundation before?*

I searched the federal Social Service website\*\*. I knew I wanted to pursue a career in development cooperation, and looked for relevant jobs that would also offer learning opportunities. I then specified Basel – my home city after finishing my studies in Zürich – and found the SFSA position. I hadn't heard of them before, but the work sounded exciting, so I applied.

*Syngenta comes in for quite a lot of criticism, and outsiders often find it hard to distinguish between the company and the Foundation. How did your family and friends react to your decision to do national service at SFSA?*

The agribusiness sector is a critical topic for many people. When I mention it in conversation I'm never sure how the other person will react. To a certain extent I was – and still am – critical of some of Syngenta's activities. My friends reacted in a similar way. They asked: "Is the company doing positive things, or not?" They also thought about the negative views and said: "It's great that you can see for yourself and get to know the situation better than most. After your national service, tell us if you've changed your mind or not." They weren't negative as such, but their attitude was less "Super, wow" and more "See for yourself how things are, be critical and form your own opinions."



*You joined SFSA in April. How has it been? How did you feel on your first day, and how do you feel now? How were you received by the team?*

On the first day I was very keen to discover how things are here. I was genuinely pleased to start work. I hope to learn a lot, and to gain a solid insight into the activities of a foundation actively engaged in development work. The work is interesting and also relevant to my future career. University studies can be a bit theoretical and vary from what is actually done in practice. So I was very open-minded. The reception I got from colleagues was extraordinary – everyone was very friendly, and the work atmosphere is quite informal. I'm looking forward to the weeks to come.

*What have you been working on so far?*

I share an office with Dominik Klauser from the R&D team. I'm working with him on soil quality, for example. In Kenya, SFSA wants to improve soil fertility and smallholder income at the same time. The methods used must provide the farmers with immediate benefits – they have no savings to fall back on while they wait.

*What are some ways to improve Kenyan soils?*

For example: plant an intermediate crop after the main harvest. That could be legumes, which add nitrogen to the soil. However, this would mean more work and expense for farmers, as they would have to obtain seedlings and plant them. Our work is to find out which measures are really and rapidly worthwhile. It's very interesting to read the relevant literature on this topic.

*What else have you been doing?*

I've also been working with Victoria Johnson-Chadwick, our Investor Relations Manager. The idea is to compile a summary of all SFSA initiatives carried out, and their success, on a single online platform. My work is to create a layout concept and produce a draft version. In addition, our lawyers have given me a task in the area of contract quality.

*You did a degree in Agricultural Sciences. What motivated you to choose this subject?*

I wanted to work in the sector in which I'm now doing national service. I've always found biology interesting, and initially began studying it with the thought of becoming a marine biologist. However, I soon realized that development cooperation was my thing, and switched to agriculture. I felt that this way I could work intensively with plants, but also gain some insights into economics

and politics. I really enjoyed the interdisciplinary nature of the course, and gathering knowledge from many scientific fields. Not in great detail, of course, but as an ‘all-rounder’ degree.



*How do you spend your free time?*

I enjoy sport, particularly football. I like its challenges and physical demands, going to one's limit and playing in a team. I also enjoy the way matches are taken seriously, and require maximum effort. Football is a release for the pent-up energy and stress that can build up in a day spent sitting at a desk. In the free time that remains I like to meet up with friends – we enjoy cooking, eating and talking.

*Many of your predecessors who completed their national service at SFSA were able to join us on temporary contracts. What do your plans look like?*

I've been thinking about that! After my national service I might travel for a month or two. At the moment I would certainly consider working for SFSA or another employer in a similar field. The work seems exciting, but I'll be able to tell you more in a few months' time!

**Samuel Steiner**, born 1992, is doing out his national social service at the Syngenta Foundation. From 2013 to 2014 he read Biology at Basel University. From 2014-2017 he did his Bachelor's degree in Agricultural Sciences at the ETH in Zürich, and completed his Master's there in 2019.

\* <https://www.syngentafoundation.org/current-opportunities>

\*\* <https://www.ezivi.admin.ch/ivy/faces/instances/16AE93D43423C48A/MainPage.xhtml> (in German)