

The responsible business initiative

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On 29 November 2020, the Swiss people voted on the popular initiative “Entreprises responsables – pour protéger l’être humain et l’environnement” (Responsible Business Initiative – protecting human rights and the environment). It sought to impose on Swiss companies a duty of due diligence in relation to human rights and the environment, coupled with civil liability for damage caused by the companies they control abroad. The initiative was accepted by a majority of voters but rejected by a majority of the cantons, which caused it to fail.¹ The indirect counter-proposal adopted by Parliament entered into force, together with its implementing ordinance, at the beginning of 2022.²

The campaign, one of the most intense in Switzerland’s recent history, placed commodity trading at the centre of the debate. Supporters of the initiative cited the cases involving Swiss traders in human rights and environmental abuses in producing countries, while opponents stressed the risks to the competitiveness of the financial centre and the unilateral nature of measures that competing countries did not apply. The trading sector mobilised against the initiative, alongside the business associations.

The failure of the initiative did not close the debate. Its supporters launched a new initiative in 2024, adapted to developments in European law, whose fate will depend on how European Union legislation on corporate due diligence develops.³ The question of the liability of Swiss companies for abuses committed in their value chains remains open.

Key point. The initiative for responsible multinationals, accepted by the people but rejected by the cantons on 29 November 2020, led to a counter-proposal that requires large companies to report on non-financial matters and imposes due diligence obligations in relation to conflict minerals and child labour. A new initiative was launched in 2024.

1 Notes

1. Vote of 29 November 2020: 50.7% in favour, but 8.5 cantons in favour against 12.5, hence rejection for want of a majority of the cantons; turnout of 47%; “Initiative populaire fédérale pour des multinationales responsables”, fr.wikipedia.org (accessed September 2026). ↩
2. Indirect counter-proposal (Art. 964a et seq. and 964j et seq. CO) in force since 1 January 2022 together with the ODiTr (Ordinance on Due Diligence and Transparency in relation to Minerals and Metals from Conflict-Affected Areas and Child Labour) of 3 December 2021, applicable to financial years beginning in 2023 onwards; “Initiative populaire fédérale pour des multinationales responsables”, fr.wikipedia.org, cited above; text of the ODiTr on lexfind.ch. ↩
3. swissinfo.ch, 27 May 2025, “Nouvelle initiative déposée pour des multinationales responsables” (New initiative filed for responsible multinationals): initiative launched at the beginning of 2025 and filed with the Federal Chancellery on 27 May 2025 with more than 287,000 signatures by the Coalition for Responsible Multinationals, demanding that multinationals respect “human rights and environmental protection in Switzerland and abroad” and be liable for damage, in alignment with “international guidelines and EU requirements”; Wikipedia (en), art. “Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive”: Directive (EU) 2024/1760 adopted by the Council on 24 May 2024, published on 5 July 2024; Morrison Foerster, “EU Sustainability Omnibus I”, 22 December 2025: compromise approved by the European Parliament on 16 December 2025 limiting the CSDDD to companies with more than 5,000 employees and EUR 1.5 billion in turnover, application postponed to 26 July 2029. ↩

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