

## Alpine Maternity: social innovation improves healthcare in mountain areas

*In 2015, in the Bern Canton, Switzerland, the obstetric department at Zweisimmen hospital was closed. As a response, the local population (counting about 3 000 inhabitants) created in the same year a cooperative to maintain obstetric care services at local level. Just two year later, in 2017, this collective action led to the opening of the Alpine Maternity in Zweisimmen.*

### Accessible healthcare

The [‘Maternity Alpine Simmental – Saanenland’ cooperative](#) was born in July 2015 to cope with the lack of obstetric healthcare services in Zweisimmen : 49 interested parties created the cooperative, which later achieved to open the premises of the Alpine Maternity in January 2017. Today, the cooperative counts around 340 members, including practitioners, midwives but also people outside the healthcare sector willing to support the initiative as well as a dozen of municipalities from the Obersimmental-Saanenland region. The cooperative provides the Alpine Maternity with a legal entity.

MORE INFO

The Alpine Maternity’s objectives are:

- To provide accessible and safe obstetric services at local level, close to patients’ home, from the beginning of the pregnancy until the end of the post-partum period.
- To guarantee a local contact point at any time in case of emergency: the maternity is open 24h/24h and 365 days per year.
- To promote cooperation with local practioners, independent midwives, Spitex services (Swiss at home care services), emergency services, mother and father advice centres etc.



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### Funding

The Alpine Maternity is funded through the cooperative’s membership fees and donations. Any individual or legal entity can become a member. Individuals must pay a one-time entry fee of CHF50 (around €45) and must take over a share certificate of minimum CHF 200 (€190). In addition to the entry fee, legal entities must take over a share certificate of minimum CHF 1000 (€930). The cooperative capital corresponds to the sum of share certificates.

In addition, the Alpine Maternity Simmental - Saanenland Association - was created in July 208. This association aims to raise more funds assigned to maternity services in order to maintain the offer of natural birth accessible in the region. Members of the association organise events throughout the Canton to promote the cooperative model and to find new members and additional funds for the Alpine Maternity. Membership to the association for an individual costs CHF 50/year, for couples/families CHF 80 /year and for legal entities CHF 200/year. Moreover, many municipalities of the region made generous donations to the association.

The cooperative’s membership fees, and the association’s membership fees and donations cover the operating deficit of the Alpine Maternity.

## Governance of the cooperative

The Alpine Maternity's cooperative is run by its members who form the General Assembly. Each member of the cooperative has one vote within the Assembly and can participate in the election of representatives (President and Board of Directors). They can also express their vote on annual reports and accounts, and in decisions regarding the management of the Maternity.

“Social innovation: the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors. [SIMRA \(Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas\)](#)”

The Board of Directors must include at least 3 natural persons chosen amongst the members of the cooperative, elected for a (renewable) 2 years mandate. The members of the Board of Directors are responsible for the daily management of the cooperative and legal decisions.

## Results and future projects

During its first year, 61 women gave birth at the Alpine Maternity and up to 80 deliveries are planned each year. Overall, in the Obersimmental-Saanenland region, 51% of natural childbirth happen at the Alpine Maternity and the rest in other regions. Being the only obstetric service of the area, the structure fills an important gap in terms of access to services of general interest. The demand is even going nationwide with patients coming from the Pays-d'Enhaut and the Lake Geneva region.



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The Alpine Maternity is also exploring the possibilities to expand its services in the future, by opening a section for planned caesarean in cooperation with Zweisimmen hospital. In this case, the hospital would be responsible for the surgeries while Alpine Maternity would provide post-delivery care. Even if, economically-speaking, this proposed project would be costly for the Alpine Maternity, it would provide additional care offers for women in the region, currently forced to go to Frutigen or Thun to access such services.

### Innovative aspect

The opening of a maternity improves the provision of services in the region. The collective engagement of this local community to address the lack of care in the region and the governance model of the cooperative make it an inspiring social innovation. Yet, the economic viability of this model, mostly relying on individual support and donations, will have to be proven in the coming years.



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