



Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Agrarwirtschaft und Agrarsoziologie
Société Suisse d'Economie et de Sociologie rurales
Swiss Society for Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology

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“African Perspectives on Global Transformations”, Swiss Society for African Studies (SGAS/SSEA) and the Association for African Studies in Germany (VAD), Basel

From 26–28 August 2026, the Swiss Society for African Studies (SGAS/SSEA) and the Association for African Studies in Germany (VAD) held their joint biennial conference at the University of Basel under the theme “African Perspectives on Global Transformations”, framed by the conceptual header of “planetary health and cosmopolitan flourishing”. Thanks to the financial support of the SGA, I participated in the panel “Reimagining the Countryside: The Politics of Rural Development in Africa”, convened by Hangala Siachiwena (University of Cape Town) and Anna Wolkenhauer (University of Bremen). Responding to the panel’s invitation to critically reflect on how governance structures and political contestation shape the possibilities for equitable and sustainable rural futures in Africa, I presented insights from my doctoral research, a multi-sited ethnography of alternative agricultures in Morocco and Switzerland. My presentation, “Farming with, against and for the State: Alternative Agricultures and Rural Development Politics in Morocco”, situated my ethnographic findings within a brief history of Morocco’s rural governance and agricultural policies. I explored how farmers practising alternative agricultures navigate the state’s many faces: rather than encountering “the state” as a coherent actor, they operate in a political landscape in which it can appear at once omnipresent and remarkably absent, actively promoting particular models of agricultural modernisation while leaving other forms of farming and rural life largely unsupported. The different presentations and the discussion revealed striking resonances across each other’s findings. Despite very different historical, social and political contexts, several contributions described governments promoting cash crops and agricultural modernisation within capitalist logics of efficiency and (dis)possession, while other forms of life and initiatives are pushed towards economic and ecological margins. While seeing dynamics across different contexts echo my own analysis was reassuring, such convergence was also disconcerting. It made me think about the risk of finding what we expect to find and subsuming different realities under broad “master theories”. The discussion thus reinforced for me the importance of what feminist geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham call “weak theory”: refusing to “know too much, extending explanations too widely or deeply” and instead remaining open to surprise, hope, coexistence and “care for the new” (in *A Postcapitalist Politics*, 2006: 8). More broadly, the conference made me reflect on the language and politics of “rural development” itself. While there is a material reality and imaginative realm to it, the term felt dated, and our panel attracted noticeably less attention than many others. Perhaps this points to the lingering colonial shadow of development thinking and practice, and raises the question of which issues and fields of inquiry come to be considered intellectually urgent—and by whom. In this regard, seeing so many African scholars gathered at the conference also brought into



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sharper relief how persistently the Swiss universities remains structured as a white space. It made tangible the need to keep asking whose knowledge, interests and discourses are included or marginalised—and how these exclusions constrain the “cosmopolitan flourishing for planetary health” invoked by the conference.