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Science and Policy

Platform of the Swiss Academy of Sciences

KFPE – Commission for Research Partnerships  
with Developing Countries

# Research networks as a pathway to achieving sustainability

International Conference of SUDAC –  
swissuniversities Development and  
Cooperation Network

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“We are standing at the threshold of an all-decisive decade,” said Peter Messerli at this year’s International Conference of SUDAC – the swissuniversities Development and Cooperation Network – held in Bern. Messerli, who is co-chair of the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) and professor at the University of Bern, called for implementation pathways and relevant changes to be made in the four most important systems: economy, energy, food and urbanisation.



*Peter Messerli*

Moreover, all measures and changes must be based on the findings of the Synthesis Reports of the World Bank, the UN organisations for climate and sustainability (IPCC, IPBES) and the GSDR itself. Peter Messerli has no doubt: “We need an initiative for sustainability research in the dimensions of the Mars mission.”

Nevertheless, the scientific community and decision-makers in policy, industry and civil society still apply different strategies to realise the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To achieve success, these efforts must be coordinated, and the various stakeholders must act quickly.

At the event “Think Global, Act Local: Relevance and Prospects of SDGs for Swiss Universities and Their Global South Partners” held on 18 October, some 140 participants discussed potential pathways towards implementing the 2030 Agenda, including how the scientific community and the responsible decision-makers in government can contribute. Laurent Goetschel, Vice-President of SUDAC, reminded the audience that research infrastructure does not rely solely on hard money but, rather, is equally dependent on the knowledge of specialists and on their networks in the North and, especially, in the Global South.

#### **Promoting partnerships with COFERs and CLOCs**

The focus of the conference was placed on research partnerships in and with the Global South. With its programmes Consortia for Education and Research (COFERs) and Clusters of Cooperation in the Global South (CLOC), swissuniversities provides important instruments to foster these research partnerships. Franco Gervasoni, President of SUDAC, said that more intense dialogue as well as the coordination of all involved actors would, however, be necessary for the combined programmes to attain the stated goal of greater sustainability. He also stressed that collaborations between universities, universities of applied sciences and arts and universities of teacher education in Switzerland are just as important as research partnerships with institutions in the Global South. Moreover, Gervasoni said, the roughly 140 conference participants were clearly communicating the need to strengthen networks simply by attending the conference: “swissuniversities will work actively to improve synergies between the numerous stakeholders.”

#### **Examples of good practice from around the globe**

Using an example from the finance sector in Argentina (COFER IFE: Innovative Financing in Education and Development), Felicitas Acosta from the University of General Sarmiento in Buenos Aires introduced the potential of research consortia. After her talk, short presentations of other current projects were given, for example, Science Action in Schools for Sustainable Development (COFER SAS4SD), which links meteorological measurements with teaching materials in order to motivate students to act sustainably; and the COFER One Health which uses modern communication technologies to better localise and fight local public health problems.

Swetha Rao Dhananka from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Western Switzerland (HES-SO) reported on how the Cluster of Cooperation (CLOC) Knowledge2Action in South Asia commenced and explained that the regional hub builds on existing partnerships in research and education in the environment and social issues. Dhananka said the programme focus is on developing interdisciplinary curricula, on connecting local knowledge with research findings and on promoting communication between researchers and other stakeholders – also those that are not part of SUDAC. She noted that the work is made much easier because “swissnex India supports us in administrative tasks as well as in communications”.



*Opening statements by Laurent Goetschel*

### **Stable political structures**

Marina Carobbio Guscetti, President of the Swiss National Council and the highest-ranking Swiss official at the conference, is convinced that “national networks and international cooperation are essential if we are to master challenges like migration, climate change or social injustice”. In her work-related travels through Mongolia, Rwanda and Mozambique, she has seen encouraging examples of water supply systems and vegetable farming that are both sustainable and effective.

“Switzerland is respected as a trusted partner and an important stakeholder on the international stage,” Carobbio Guscetti said, adding, however, that policymaking can only supply the general conditions for cooperation in research and education. She stressed that it lies in the responsibility of the research and education institutions to deliver excellent work within these structures.

### **“Creating constructive cooperation”**

Boniface Kiteme represented the perspective of partner institutions in the Global South. “We should be hearing alarm bells when looking at the extremely low levels of investment made in research in countries with medium-to-low low incomes,” said Kiteme, who is Director of the Center for Training and Integrated Research (CETRAD) in Kenya. He pointed out that 80 per cent of academically trained people in Kenya hold leading positions at policy and decision-making levels and thus would often have the opportunity to apply their knowledge. Kiteme’s arguments demonstrate there is a high need for academically trained staff in Africa not only in research but also in government positions. He stressed that “capacity building goes far beyond the academic sector”.



*Discussions among participants*

### **“The language of cooperation”**

Overcoming the boundaries of specialist language is a foundational aspect and can promote mutual respect – this is what Tahrat Shahid from the organisation UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) said in a discussion moderated by Thomas Brey from the Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE). “We need a language for cooperation partnerships,” agreed Nicolas Seidler from the Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI) at the University of Geneva. Knowledge shouldn’t be produced in a vacuum; instead, it must be made assessable to a broad audience, he said, while also noting that the differing needs of academics and policymakers pose an obstacle to constructive dialogue. Aline Cossy-

Gantner from the Fondation Botnar emphasised the promising approaches in thematic and interdisciplinary research topics, also saying that foundations could afford greater risks and offer seed funding. Over the course of the conference, numerous perspectives for cooperation projects in Switzerland's academic community took shape; these will be further pursued.

**Funding sources, transparency, effectiveness: the research sector in Switzerland**

The final panel discussion with important stakeholders and moderator Gilles Carbonnier from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva once again drew attention to the differing needs of the various actors. "Seed money works miracles," was the résumé of Michael Hengartner, President of swissuniversities. Even modest funding can have a strong impact, he continued, adding that he believes in building on bottom-up initiatives of students. Together, and with true passion, a great deal can be set in motion, Hengartner said with a nod to the youth climate movement.



*The concluding panel discussion*

Ambassador Mauro Moruzzi confirmed there is a lack of communication about the large amount of federal funding invested in research and university education. "We guarantee the best-possible structures for successful cooperation," said Moruzzi, who is Head of International Relations at the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). But, he noted, the impacts of the funding should be made more visible.

"Help us to create solutions," was what Tatjana von Steiger demanded of the researchers and academics. Steiger is Deputy Head of the Global Cooperation Department of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and she stressed that evidence-based knowledge must form the foundation for both national and international policy decisions. The greatest challenge lies in how the various stakeholders cooperate: "We will fail if we can't level the global difference in knowledge." Jean-Luc Barras, Head of International Cooperation at the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), added that SNSF in future plans to develop instruments that transfer knowledge into policymaking and industry: "We must strengthen implementation networks," Barras said.

Christa Markwalder, National Councilmember for the Swiss Liberal Party, warned that "we mustn't forget that the private sector has an enormous amount of leverage". Politicians rely on information from academia, she continued, and she is convinced that a more proactive communication strategy would further strengthen the impact of scholarly findings.

Marcel Tanner, President of Swiss Academy of Sciences (SCNAT), called to mind existing projects in francophone West Africa in the 1970s, where the participatory methods in the programme Recherche, Action, Formation (RAF) in the agriculture sector were not limited to achieving small improvements, but rather led to major transformations in farming. Tanner then appealed to his panel colleagues and the audience: "We should never forget that great advances are possible."

**Further Information**

Further information on the conference (presentations, videos, pictures): [Here](http://www.swissuniversities.ch/sudac)  
[www.swissuniversities.ch/sudac](http://www.swissuniversities.ch/sudac)  
[www.kfpe.ch](http://www.kfpe.ch)