



Call for Papers

Exploring Innovation and Creativity for Development

19-20 June, 2025, University of Zurich

Creativity and innovation are now often hailed as “the true wealth of nations in the twenty-first century” (UN 2024). While the dominant development paradigm continues to emphasize economic growth based on free markets, productivity and the division of labour, the focus has shifted to how these are pushed and redefined by creativity and innovation. This is evident in discourses on the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), which seem particularly appealing to emerging economies. Many countries in the “Global South” have embraced the ideas of the 4IR in an attempt to leapfrog ahead and avoid the middle-income trap. Governments, international and civil society organizations and various actors in the private sector promote creativity and innovation as pathways to sustainable, inclusive and smart development.

The question is what this focus on innovation and creativity for development means for the daily lives of people in specific socio-economic contexts—and what it fails to see or do. Ethnographic studies have examined how the promises of creativity and innovation are, on the one hand tied up with aspirations for a good life, individual self-improvement and empowerment, and on the other hand, with imaginations of alternatives to capitalist growth (Lindtner 2020; Irani 2019). To explore such aspirations and imaginations, it may be helpful to follow Tim Ingold and Elizabeth Hallam’s suggestion and take a closer look at the processes and movements that lead to innovations (“improvisation”), rather than on the results themselves (“innovation”). This, they argue, is a forward reading of innovation “of a world that is crescent rather than created; that is ‘always in the making’ [...] instead of ready-made” (Ingold and Hallam 2007: 3). Focusing on these processes and practices can also help us gain insights into how certain people, aspirations, and projects are selected and promoted in the name of development, while others are not (Irani 2019). Indeed, although innovations are recognized as successful only upon their realization, the promises of innovation-driven capitalism are actually predicated on failures and exclusions (Appadurai and Alexander 2020; Thoma 2020).

Against this background, we ask: Whose creativity is deemed valuable, and why? Who is involved in making innovations, and who are “Innovators’ Others” (Irani 2019)? What constitutes “creativity” and “innovation” in particular contexts, and upon what assumptions are these terms understood? What are the consequences of introducing innovative technologies, designs and ideas for individuals, communities, and the environment? For this 2-day workshop, we are interested in discussing examples of how creativity and innovation work on the ground in different parts of the world. We would like to invite scholars whose papers introduce conceptual thoughts and/or empirical views on actors, practices and discourses in innovation and creativity for development.

A title, short abstract (300 words) and short author bio can be submitted until January 19, 2025 to Nadja Kempster (nadja.kempton@uzh.ch).

Organizing Committee:

Prof. Dr. Annuska Derks, Dr. Rivka Eisner, Dr. Esther Horat, Phuong Nguyen and Nadja Kempster.