

The Volkswagen Foundation and Its International Focus 2016

# Crossing Borders



VolkswagenStiftung

### The Foundation's Purpose

The purpose of the Foundation is to support and advance the humanities and social sciences as well as science and technology in higher education and research.

(Statutes of the Volkswagen Foundation, § 2)

### The Foundation's Mission

The Foundation is committed to encouraging ambitious research across disciplinary, institutional, and national borders and to supporting creative researchers in breaking new ground.



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while highly motivated graduates often choose alternative careers or have to emigrate because they can't find a job in their branch at home. "That's totally unbalanced", Schmidt complains. Over the next twenty years the demand for engineers in the emerging economies of Sub-Saharan Africa is going to grow rapidly, so the problem can only get worse.

As the engaged German researcher with a wealth of experience in the organization of international congresses knows, "Another problem is that young scientists are not able to benefit fully from offers of international networking and cooperation or attend expert events through lack of financial support". He sees this as a shortcoming of development policy. "Without question, children must learn to read and write, and also adult education is important. However, we should step up efforts to improve the education of university students. After all, those are the people who will shape the future of their countries in academia, politics, and economy. We should support them in achieving a really sustainable development and a secure independent existence", he stresses.

**Schmidt has no doubt** that the young African scientists are going to make their mark. "The next generation of sustainable cement types is going to come from Africa", he says. And because they are not so entrenched in conventions, he fully expects African engineers to come up with new ideas in other areas of construction like building design, for instance.

Having closed with a visit to the large airport construction site in Dar Es Salaam, the event as a whole delivered a motivational boost to the participants' research efforts and further education. For example, some of them now want to enroll on online courses offered by foreign universities in combination with personal mentoring.

Msinjili and Schmidt, the organizers, are doing their part to ensure that the symposium series has an ongoing impact. Besides compiling a

200-page report on the symposium proceedings, they have initiated a LinkedIn group to provide a platform for participants and experts alike to keep in touch.

**Msinjili is already making plans** for the next two symposia to be held 2016 in Accra, Ghana, and 2017 in Johannesburg, South Africa. The focus then will be on valorization of by-products for cement production and waste management, as well as on application of tailored African concrete solutions and new capacity building, respectively. The construction engineer expects many more applications than for the kick-off event, and she hopes next time to receive more applications from Germany. In future she would also prefer the symposia to be held in universities rather than hotels: "That way local students would be able to benefit by listening to the presentations of the international young researchers and experts, and they could possibly actively participate with posters, for instance, and provide added inspiration to the discussions and proceedings".

Over the next couple of years, Msinjili will have her hands full working on her doctoral project and her concept for refining rice-husk ash for use as a sustainable and applicable cement clinker replacement. And she also wants to do her part in raising the share of women in her branch. This was another result of the symposium in Dar Es Salaam: All six female African participants expressed their conviction that female engineers should more often be able to present themselves and their work at schools and universities. This would encourage young women to become involved with sustainable construction projects and play a greater role in shaping the future of their country.

*Andrea Hoferichter*

For further information on KEYS please visit:

• [www.volkswagenstiftung.de/cb/keys](http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/cb/keys)

## With Flexibility, a Sense of Responsibility, and Patience

### Cooperative research on developments in the Arab world is a challenge for all concerned.

The transformation processes in the Arab world triggered by the 'Arab Spring' 2010/2011 are also an important topic for research. The Volkswagen Foundation soon offered scholars from Germany and the Arab region opportunities to engage in cooperative research on special aspects of these processes. How does a project function under the difficult circumstances that prevail in the region? Is it at all possible for science to accompany processes developing at such a pace that it's difficult to keep up with events? Mareike Knoke spoke with Middle East historian Ulrike Freitag.

*Professor Freitag, many scholars say the fast-moving events of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 took them completely by surprise. Did you think it would develop so rapidly?*

**Freitag:** I had no idea that the uprisings would spread so quickly from one country to another, and that they would give rise to the bloody civil wars now raging in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Of course, everyone knew that something was afoot, that there were discussions and widespread discontent. The enormous escalation, though, caught us all by surprise.

*What effect do such surprise turns of event have on your work as a researcher?*

**Freitag:** Changes like these are part and parcel of my daily work as I research precisely those areas where certain social or political movements are likely to originate: schools, youth clubs, and youth magazines. Moreover, the transformation project I'm part of here at ZMO is investigating public and private spaces of participation and resistance in Morocco, Egypt, and Palestine.



**Prof. Dr. Ulrike Freitag** is director of the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin (ZMO) since 2002. A historian of the Middle East, one of her special interests is Saudi Arabia. The ZMO is an internationally recognized and leading research institute devoted to interdisciplinary study of the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, South and South East Asia with a strong historical perspective. Within the context of the first call of the funding scheme "Transformation Processes in the Arab World", the Volkswagen Foundation is funding a project called "Spaces of Participation: Topographies of Political and Social Change in Morocco, Egypt, and Palestine", which is run by Ulrike Freitag and Dr. Sarah Jurkiewicz together with local partners.



Professor Freitag at the Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. You can never tell exactly when the critical undercurrents in society there are likely to change suddenly into something qualitatively different; namely, movements of open protest.

**The objective pursued by the Foundation's funding scheme is to research these processes in cooperation with Arab partners, to monitor events, and perhaps even provide support in the form of knowledge gain. To what extent can that succeed, do you think?**

**Freitag:** We are working together with Arab partners in different countries. We want to function as a catalyst, helping young academics to network among themselves: Especially when it comes to drawing comparisons between the processes in the countries concerned. Most of the young researchers we are in contact with are already strongly committed individuals. The projects are intended to provide further food for thought. We hope to complement this input via our project meetings in the partner countries. Besides discussing our research work, we will also invite local artists and intellectuals to attend a public event. The idea is to initiate a communication process that will outlive the

actual projects. Whether this functions or not, we will just have to wait and see.

**Do you come across any hurdles during your work?**

**Freitag:** In our case there were some difficulties concluding the required cooperation agreements with the partner universities. As we already knew from other colleagues, we often have to be extremely flexible. For instance, immediately following the revolution, our Egyptian colleague tried to formalize the research cooperation with Cairo University. The university management was very taken with the idea. And then – it was shortly after President Mursi's ouster – she was informed by her university that it was no longer opportune for local academics to work with researchers in other countries. In any case, she was told, it would take several years before an agreement could be signed. In Morocco, on the other hand, not only would tax have had to be paid on the project funds, depleting them significantly, but also the university wanted to keep part of it as institutional overhead. This would have meant nothing would be left over for the local Ph.D. students. We did finally manage in both cases to conclude agreements, but had to find another solution for the young research associates via stipend contracts.

**Does the fast pace of developments in these countries sometimes frustrate project proceedings?**

**Freitag:** Here, we have to be flexible, too. For instance, during the kick-off meeting for our project in Berlin we had to confront the question whether, after the overthrow of Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013, it would still be possible to investigate the protest camp on Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and carry out interviews. Was such a field study still possible, or would it endanger the young research associates in Cairo and, of course, their interlocutors? They could easily be identified as

such from the interviews and subsequently put under arrest. For the same reason, we refrained from setting up a Facebook page for the project because data security – details of the participating persons – couldn't be ensured.

**That means you feel a sense of responsibility for your partners?**

**Freitag:** But of course. We must never lose sight of the safety of the people we cooperate with. We have to take the threat of possible reprisals very seriously indeed. In many cases, the very fact that funding is received from abroad can be enough to raise suspicion. For this reason, for a long time we have made a point of discussing with our partners whether granting a German stipend might be a danger for research associates in their countries.

**Do you always know the reason why your and other researchers' efforts are sometimes thwarted?**

**Freitag:** At least sometimes official reasons are given. I can relate an experience made in a project initiated by German and French colleagues in Saudi Arabia: An architect wanted to research traditional stone architecture in Saudi Arabian villages in cooperation with a local women's university. The local governor of the region, however, banned a planned meeting in one of the villages because he considered the presence of young female students to be indecent – supposedly because it couldn't be ensured that the genders would be separated during the event. Whether the ban was really due to moral considerations or whether the governor was bothered by the idea that a free exchange might take place between the artists, village inhabitants, urban intellectuals, and foreign researchers expected to be present, we never found out.

**Are problems like that negotiable?**

**Freitag:** The mood can change at any time and at very short notice; we have to live with that.

Sometimes such issues can be negotiated with local authorities, sometimes one just has to act at the spur of the moment.

**What about support here in Germany: Is there sufficient funding for research on the Arab world?**

**Freitag:** The funding that comes from the Volkswagen Foundation is something of a wind-fall: It takes into account the need for flexibility I was talking about and which is so important for researchers working in the region. Of course we would like to see more initiatives of this type. It is most unlikely that state institutions would be prepared to fund a project like ours because of the frequently unstable research conditions.

**In conclusion, a question about the role you play: How far do you see yourself in an advisory position?**

**Freitag:** For my part – I'm sure I can also talk for my German project colleagues at ZMO in this respect – I do not see myself as an advisor in the countries we are researching in. We cannot, and we don't want to intervene in local politics. The only exception might, at times, be an academic advisory function. However, I do perceive an important task in reaching as wide a public as possible. In Germany we can do this by means of scientific and other publications and lectures that challenge stereotypes and provide a differentiated picture of Arab countries and the conditions that prevail there. We of course also want to address the politicians. For it appears they often have no idea of how diverse positions and discussions are within different Arab countries. There are many facets quite surprising to outsiders, such as the existence of many well trained critical artists and intellectuals in a country such as Saudi Arabia.

For information on projects funded under this scheme please visit:

• [www.volkswagenstiftung.de/cb/arabregion](http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de/cb/arabregion)