

Applied geography in Switzerland : actual problems and future challenges

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Pour terminer, il me reste encore le devoir agréable d'exprimer ma sincère gratitude à tous ceux qui ont contribué à la réalisation de cette revue. Ce sont tout d'abord les auteurs qui ont été spontanément prêts à

communiquer leur expérience fortement estimée dans cette publication. Nous aimerions également remercier la rédaction de la Geographica Helvetica, qui a rendu possible cette publication.

Applied Geography in Switzerland – Actual Problems and Future Challenges

Translation: Cornelia Mayerhofer, Zurich

A few years ago, applied geography was looked upon as a strange profession that should rather devote itself to its assigned task in the educational system. The rapid development and the steadily increasing transformation of our landscape – and above all their consequences, i. e. the increasing destruction of our environment and the natural fundamentals of life – have meanwhile convinced the public that applied geography can contribute to the protection and development of an optimal human environment. This can be done by continual area planning, research, project planning and management. Applied geography – and by this we understand all geographical activities except those in education – therefore plays an increasingly important part in our society, above all in the topical fields of area planning and environmental protection. Politics and the media give us an example of the great importance attributed to the problems relating to applied geography in our country.

It is therefore not surprising that the number of geography students enrolled at Swiss universities and institutes of technology has more than quadrupled between 1968 and 1979. A survey carried out by the Swiss Society of Applied Geography (which in 1982 investigated all the geographical institutes of Switzerland) clearly shows that the number of newly graduated geographers who do not want to teach will soon exceed the number of job vacancies by far. According to the results of this survey, we may estimate that the number of students who graduated in 1982/83 already equals one third of all positions held by applied geographers. Nevertheless we should bear in mind that the natural rotation of positions has hardly occurred yet, because of the relatively low average age of employed geographers.

However, Switzerland is not the only country where the situation is getting worse. In the Federal Republic of Germany, for instance, the number of newly graduated geographers is estimated to increase by 20% each year. In 1982/83 some 7000 students were enrolled in geography, with a demand for employment

being far greater than the number of vacancies which can be estimated at a few hundred positions at best.

In this situation where problems relating to applied geography are given topical interest on the one hand and where, on the other hand, it becomes increasingly less probable to find a suitable employment after having graduated in geography, we may well ask us whether geography will more and more continue to function without geographers. Considering the facts that the Swiss Federal Offices which are mainly active in the fields of applied geography do not employ a single geographer and that the central tasks of geography are not fulfilled by geographers in research institutes, we may be inclined to answer this question positively.

Nevertheless we should also bear in mind that applied geographers take an active part in many fields of geographical science and thus help to broaden the image of our profession. According to a survey of the Swiss Society of Applied Geography, its members were employed in the following positions in 1981:

Public administration		46%
- at the federal level	20%	
- at the cantonal level	20%	
- at the regional level	4%	
- at the municipal level	2%	
Universities/Federal Institutes of Technology		24%
Private sector		22%
- planning and consulting offices	11%	
- other service trades	4%	
- free-lance activity	7%	
Other activities		8%

by Ulrich Roth, President of the Swiss Society of Applied Geography

If these figures are grouped into fields of activity, we get the following picture:

Area planning (including partial planning fields)	39%
Regional economy	7%
Nature and countryside protection	17%
Other types of environmental protection	1%
Basic and applied research	16%
Documentation	3%
Mapping and publishing	4%
Museums	3%
Journalism	1%
Other activities	9%

These two tables clearly show us that applied geography already includes a wide range of activities and that geographers are also accepted as true partners in many fields. Thus the Federal Offices of Agriculture and Area Planning have, for instance, entrusted the Swiss Society of Applied Geography with preparations for a national research programme for the utilization of land, which has meanwhile been approved by the Federal Council.

This publication of themes in applied geography in Switzerland has been issued on the occasion of a symposium which will precede the International Geographical Congress in Paris. The symposium, which has been organized by the Swiss Society of Applied Geography in cooperation with the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and the University of Lausanne, will take place in Zurich and Lausanne from August 20–25, 1984. The main purpose of this meeting will be to show the opportunities and the basic conditions for the profession of geography from various points of view and to determine their integration into the scope of activities of our time.

In order to express their intentions, the organizers want to open the discussion on the following points:

- Closer relations between universities/federal institutes of technology and practical experience. This will help to discover the real needs of our society more rapidly and to deal with them in education in time. Such relations could, for instance, be established by the creation of more practical courses outside the university and by inviting more practitioners to lecture at universities.
- Better information of the students about later work possibilities and the special requirements involved. This could, for instance, be achieved by a continual actualization of lecture courses as well as institute libraries by practical experience. Such measures would help the students come into contact with competent specialists more easily.
- Specialization in a particular field of geography without ignoring the correlation between this field and other fields of geography. Although general

geographers may stand a chance of planning and organizing a whole project, geographers usually enter the working world by dealing with a part of a project. In most cases, such an activity requires specialists that are strong enough to compete with neighbouring disciplines.

- Broadening of the image of our profession and cooperation between all applied geographers. We may well ask why less than 50% of our colleagues do not call themselves geographers, as has been demonstrated by a survey of the Swiss Society of Applied Geography. We should therefore present our projects and activities to the general public more often and thus turn the public attention to the possibilities geography offers to solve our current problems.

With this publication the authors plan to start a discussion among the geographers themselves as well as among the general public. Such an exchange of views seems to be necessary, if we want to achieve our aims. We therefore feel very glad that we could entrust competent authors of our own ranks and of close circles with this task. It would, of course, go beyond the limits of this publication to illuminate all the various aspects of applied geography in Switzerland. For the sake of clarity, we have divided the 15 articles into six groups:

1. Applied geography – Its position in area planning
2. Applied geography – Closer relations between research and practical experience
3. Applied geography – Basic elements of actual problems
4. Applied geography within the frame of major project evaluation
5. Applied geography – Its contribution to nature and countryside protection
6. Applied geography within public discussion

Unfortunately we have not been successful in our efforts to convince our colleagues from the French and Italian speaking parts of Switzerland to contribute to this publication, even though applied geography also plays an important role in solving actual problems in these parts of our country.

We hope that our publication will draw more attention to the various fields of activity of applied geography in Switzerland. Above all we want to show that we can still open new fields of activity to geographers, if all interested circles are decided to cooperate for the same goal. This is one of the most important tasks of applied geography in the years to come.

Finally I want to express many thanks to all those who have contributed to this publication. First of all I want to thank the authors who have spontaneously decided to share their highly esteemed experience with all our readers. I also want to thank the editors of *Geographica Helvetica* for having made this publication possible.