

Call for Papers – Workshop

The History of Agrochemicals and International Development: Knowledge, Politics, and Business, 1940s to the Present

Date and place of the workshop: 6 November 2026, European University Institute, Florence, Italy

In the decades following World War Two, the use of chemicals in agriculture (natural and synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, fungicides, herbicides, disinfectants, etc.) dramatically increased in many parts of the world. In the 1950s and 1960s, these substances became central to visions of agricultural modernization, international development, and rural economic progress. Their widespread application also reshaped ecosystems and raised concerns about environmental and public health effects.

The goal of this workshop is to explore how agrochemicals have influenced the relationship between scientific knowledge, international development agendas and approaches, and national political priorities in different regions of the world. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the role of business companies and other non-governmental actors in shaping strategies for and against the use of agrochemicals. We invite contributions that analyze how agrochemicals have interacted with human and natural environments in specific localities. We are equally interested in how these interactions have been debated, legitimized, or contested within scientific communities, development organizations, and national and international politics.

Workshop Themes

We welcome contributions from the fields of history and the social sciences working with historical approaches on topics including, but not limited to:

1. Knowledge about agrochemicals

- Production and circulation of scientific knowledge on pesticides, fertilizers, and other agrochemicals
- Expert networks and agricultural research institutions
- The role of universities, laboratories, and industry in shaping understandings of agrochemical risks and benefits

2. Agrochemicals and international development

- Agrochemicals in development programs, in both the Global South and Global North
- Cold War geopolitics, economic development, and science

- International organizations and associations promoting or regulating the use of agrochemicals

3. Environmental and health consequences of postwar agricultural development

- Ecological transformations linked to chemical-intensive agriculture and forestry
- Public health debates, toxicology, and environmental activism
- Long-term assessments of chemical exposure in rural and forest environments

We welcome contributions covering topics from across the globe, particularly those that investigate issues related to gender, race, and class from social history, environmental history, multispecies history, and/or interdisciplinary approaches.

This event aims to bring together scholars at various career stages who are investigating the history of agriculture, environmental governance, international development, and rural development. The outcome of the conference will be a peer-reviewed edited volume. Contributors will be asked to pre-circulate papers based on original empirical research.

This event is part of the research project “Chemical Crossroads: Agrarian Transitions, Pesticide Controversies, and International Governance, 1940–1970,” which is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (www.chemicalcrossroads.com). The project will be able to cover parts of travel expenses and accommodation costs for participants (two nights of accommodation and travel in economy class). Participants are expected to arrive on Thursday, November 5, and stay until Saturday, November 7. The workshop will take place on Friday, November 6, and will end with dinner.

Timeline

Deadline for proposal submission: 16 March 2026

Interested participants are invited to submit a proposal consisting of an abstract of approximately 500 words and a short CV (max. one page). Please send submissions to both Elife Biçer-Deveci, elife.bicer@graduateinstitute.ch, and Viktor Blum, viktor.blum@eui.eu.

Notification of acceptance: 20 April 2026

Deadline for pre-circulated papers: 18 October 2026

Accepted participants are expected to submit a full paper of approximately 5,000 words in advance of the conference.

Workshop organizers:

Elife Biçer-Deveci, Geneva Graduate Institute

Amalia Ribi Forclaz, Geneva Graduate Institute

Corinna Unger, European University Institute