



Zurich Human Geography Colloquium Spring Semester 2024

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Digging in the drylands: Valuing labor and landform in nature-based solutions

**Public lecture: Tue, 19 March, 4-5pm, Room Y25-H-38
Campus Irchel, Winterthurerstrasse 190, 8057 Zürich**

Across drylands of Africa, an unassuming landform has multiplied by the hundreds of thousands in recent years. Known as soil “bunds” or “half-moons”, these small earthen semi-circles are dug in order to capture and redistribute runoff during the rainy season, breaking up hardened bare soil crusts and regenerating rangeland grasses. Non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies celebrate bunds as paradigmatic “nature-based solutions”, touting them as low-tech, low-cost, scalable interventions for ecological restoration and climate adaptation in African drylands. Yet financing and implementing bunds at a large scale is far from straightforward. They are remarkably expensive, and their construction requires huge amounts of carefully coordinated human labor in remote geographies – even more difficult given the recent devastating drought in the Horn of Africa. This talk explores how and why bund-digging projects have nonetheless proliferated. Drawing examples from Kenyan rangelands, I show how bunds have come to bear and circulate diverse forms of value – ecological, social, economic, and financial – highlighting the centrality of low- or no-cost labor to realizing this value. This case suggests neglected questions for other nature-based solutions: How are standardized wage rates constructed? What is the value of volunteered versus paid work? How are remunerative adaptation jobs distributed? And what is the construction of an adaptive landform “worth”, and to whom?

Leigh Johnson is an economic geographer and political ecologist whose work examines the economic distribution of climate and disaster risks, and the labor regimes through which climate adaptation is performed. Previously a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in the Economic Geography Group at GIUZ, she is happy to return as Verena Meyer Guest Professor for Spring 2024