



Josef Kohlbacher on the occasion of the presentation of the Werner Welzig Prize (January 16, 2023; Photo: ÖAW Works Council)

In Memoriam: Josef Kohlbacher

It is with deep sadness that we announce the passing of MMag. DDr. Josef Kohlbacher, who passed away unexpectedly on August 12, 2026, at the age of 67. With his passing, the Institute for Urban and Regional Research (ISR) and the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) lose a colleague whose dedication, expertise, and collegiality significantly shaped the development of our institute.

Josef Kohlbacher was born in Lilienfeld in 1958. He studied at the University of Vienna, completing teacher training degrees in History and German Studies between 1982 and 1986, alongside a doctorate in Ethnology with Egyptology, as well as a master's and doctorate in Sociology. Driven by wide-ranging intellectual interests, he also studied Zoology. It was this intense curiosity about the world that took him on travels during and after his university years to countries that are partially inaccessible today. He cycled across Egypt and traveled extensively through India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. Beginning in 1984, he worked as a researcher at the Museum of Ethnology in Vienna in the North America and

South Asia regional departments, conducting extensive ethnological field research in Egypt and the Indian subcontinent.

The breadth of his academic training and the profound impressions gathered on his travels shaped his vision of science. Josef Kohlbacher was a true generalist whose research consistently focused on broader societal structures and interdependencies. With his multifaceted background, he was an academic boundary-crosser whose work addressed thematic issues across disciplinary borders through a broad spectrum of methodologies. His research was defined by a deep understanding of the complex structures of our society and an unyielding pursuit of knowledge.

His academic career led him to the Austrian Academy of Sciences in 1988, where he made significant contributions to empirical migration research over several decades. His extensive body of work, focusing on xenophobia, East-West migration, the integration of migrants into the housing market, urban integration policy, social and occupational mobility, interethnic relations in urban contexts, and ethnic residential segregation, demonstrates how closely his research was tied to pressing contemporary challenges. A rapid responsiveness to societal shifts was a hallmark of his approach to research. Following the 2015 refugee situation, he quickly pivoted his research focus toward refugee studies and co-founded the transdisciplinary Refugee Outreach & Research Network (ROR-n).

Josef Kohlbacher was not only a brilliant scholar, but also an individual who continually sought dialogue. His research was never an academic end in itself, but was always aimed at making a meaningful impact on society. While he never sought the public spotlight, he was an active networker within the scientific community, participating in numerous national and international projects and initiatives. His commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and international partnerships earned him immense recognition at the Academy, across Austria, and well beyond its borders. His publications and lectures inspired not only academic colleagues, but also policymakers and the wider public.

Through his many years as Deputy Director of the ISR, Josef Kohlbacher played a central role in guiding the institute. His colleagues could always count on his professional expertise and readiness to help. He served as a valued mentor to early-career researchers, offering guidance and support whenever needed. Beyond his scholarly achievements, Josef Kohlbacher was distinguished by his modesty, humor, and warmth. His colleagues at the ISR valued him not

only for his intellectual brilliance, but for his humanity. Whenever someone needed advice or support, his door was always wide open. Now, it has closed forever.

In losing Josef Kohlbacher, the Austrian Academy of Sciences loses an outstanding researcher, a cherished colleague, and a dear friend. His legacy will live on through the numerous projects he initiated and guided, and his ideas and commitment will continue to inspire us in the years ahead.

On behalf of the staff at ISR,

Ursula Reeger and Robert Musil