

Opening Address Prof. dr. Estelle Doudet (UNIL) – Research Forum, Casablanca, 25 March 2026¹

**Distinguished President and Vice-President of Hassan II University of Casablanca,
Esteemed colleagues, partners, and members of the CIVIS community,
Ladies and gentlemen,
*Salam maleikoum.***

"Traveling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a storyteller."

I will try not to remain speechless before you, but I borrow these words, attributed to a great Moroccan figure, first to express my sincere gratitude to our Moroccan hosts for their warm welcome and outstanding organisation. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General and the CIVIS coordination team for their commitment and hard work, which made this first international Forum possible.

Now that I have caught my breath, let me briefly tell you a story. It begins almost exactly seven hundred years ago. Not far from this Hassan II University: in Tangier. And it is the story of a journey—and of a traveller. A journey that would last thirty years and extend over 120,000 kilometres. A traveller known today by scholars everywhere, and whose name resonates far beyond our scientific circles, reaching the broader public: the Moroccan Ibn Battuta, undoubtedly one of the greatest travellers in the history of our continents.

Setting out from North Africa to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, Ibn Battuta, far better than I, recounted magnificent stories: his discovery of the great metropolises of the Near East and their urban challenges, the agricultural techniques of the Indus Valley, the technical innovations of the learned men of China, the political relations between kingdoms of Central Africa, the commercial networks in Spain and along the European shores of the Mediterranean ; at a time when, from Italy, another traveller with insatiable curiosity, Marco Polo, was also exploring the world.

For both Ibn Battuta and Polo, traveling is not merely seeing the world: it is seeking to understand how other peoples live, how they educate their children, care for their sick, organise their cities, and honour their scholars. In all the stages described by Ibn Battuta, one theme appears again and again: our hero meets groups of scholars and engages with them to gather as much information as possible, to test hypotheses and interpretations, to benefit from feedback. In short, they organise scientific gatherings—much like the one we will hold together over the next three days.

We too, on a not-so-distant day in November 2023, decided to formally integrate research into the activities of CIVIS. And look how far we have already come.

¹ Co-written with Léa Moreau, UNIL.

As a professor of Medieval Studies in a Swiss university, I teach my students the lessons of Ibn Battuta, who wrote in the prologue of his *Rihla*: “I resolved never to turn back as long as there remained a country I had not visited”.

This determination is that of researchers: always moving forward, crossing the frontiers of the known. Science advances thanks to those who refuse to give up exploring new territories: geographical, intellectual, or disciplinary.

As Vice-Rector for Research of the University of Lausanne and Chair of the CIVIS Research Council, I see this Forum not simply as an event, but as a milestone in our collective journey to new territories.

For the first time, we are gathering on this scale to bring together African and European partners within the CIVIS framework. This reflects a clear ambition: to foster open, equitable, and globally engaged research. This Forum provides an opportunity for researchers from all the universities in the alliance to present their projects, make contacts, and, who knows, forge new research connections. It is an ideal moment for discovery, academic exchange, and strengthening ties among the universities of our alliance.

It is also an opportunity to showcase the vitality of the research activities supported by CIVIS. CIVIS has succeeded in creating an environment that encourages the development of practical and socially relevant research initiatives. Indeed, the civic ethos of our alliance is clearly reflected in the projects and initiatives presented here.

This civic ethos is particularly close to my heart. It is our responsibility to bring it to life through our research. It is no coincidence that citizen-led research occupies a special place within CIVIS. Our conviction is that research co-created with our pluralistic societies will help us find solutions to today's challenges. And this approach is strongly reflected in the contributions presented at this Forum.

When we consider the research activities carried out since 2024, the year the first Europe–Africa research seed funding call was launched, we can be proud of how far we have come. Dozens of projects have been initiated, covering a wide range of topics: from health to urban studies, from gender studies to climate research. This diversity is a major asset to our alliance.

I am also particularly pleased by the priority given to the next generation of academics within CIVIS research projects. Several doctoral schools have been established or have welcomed new partners thanks to CIVIS support and the drive of project leaders. More broadly, supporting early-career researchers is a priority for CIVIS, which aims to provide them with access to international networks and the freedom to explore interdisciplinary ideas. We are committed to pursuing this path in the future.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, our researchers, the heirs of Ibn Battuta. *Choukran* ! For it is thanks to you that we are able to celebrate research within CIVIS today. You lead research projects within the alliance and, day after day, build trust between our institutions. It is clear that it is through your commitment that our cooperation takes shape and grows.

Ladies and gentlemen,
May your travels and encounters not leave you speechless, but transform you into passionate storytellers: for knowledge is sharing.

The CIVIS Alliance represents more than a network of universities. It embodies a shared commitment: to address global challenges through collaboration, inclusivity, and academic excellence.

And this Forum is not an endpoint, it is a starting point for deeper collaboration.
for more equitable research.
for a truly interconnected African–European academic community.
Let us make the most of this opportunity.
Let us listen to one another.
Let us learn from one another.
And let us build, together, partnerships that will endure, hopefully, for the next seven centuries...

Thank you very much. I wish you all an inspiring and productive Forum.

*Casablanca, Maroc
25 mars 2026*