Transcript: "We want to understand social change": The Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP)

[German video, English subtitles]

Sabine Zinn: We want to understand human life. We want to know how social groups live together. Plus, we want to figure out the connection between people's inner lives, their attitudes, their beliefs, and how they might act. But to do that, we somehow have to make that measurable. The question is, how do you do that? Because there's no one to tell you. That means it's an incredibly interesting and exciting task to figure out for ourselves how to map this change. The Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) is a household panel study that has been surveying thousands to 10,000 people in private households annually since 1984. The study began in 1984 with a sample size of approximately 5,000 households, and we now survey over 30,000 people in over 20,000 households. It's important to know that the SOEP started as a small project, naturally involving only a relatively small number of people. But over the past few decades, the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) team has grown massively.

Nearly 80 people now work in the SOEP division, supporting data collection and processing. They also conduct research using the data. It is very important that we have researchers from a wide range of disciplines: economics, social sciences, and psychology. And all these researchers collaborate within the SOEP division. This, of course, helps to continuously enrich the study with new content and to verify the information being collected. This feedback to and from the research contributes to the high quality of the data we ask about in the study. For example, when we recently aimed to measure the impact of AI, artificial intelligence, on society, we had a very small team working on it. We need some kind of questioning tool that allows us to measure if people are afraid, what their expectations are, and what they hope to gain from it. And then to implement that in a survey to see if it measures what we want to know, if it measures it consistently across all population groups, and then see what we find out. For example, with this small study I just talked about, we found that most people in Germany have very little direct contact with artificial intelligence or aren't even aware that they have contact with it. And that they are actually relatively open to the use of artificial intelligence in various areas—in work, education, and health—although they do have certain reservations regarding the health sector. Just translating something like that is incredibly exciting, and it's challenging. That's why working on it is so much fun.