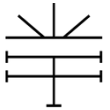


CALL FOR APPLICATIONS



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Regenerating Democracy : *Capabilities, Commons, Care*

Junior Researcher's Institute on "Substantive Democracy"



Gaston Berger University
Saint-Louis (Senegal), December 1st - 6, 2025

Regenerating Democracy : *Capabilities, Commons, Care*

A joint initiative of the Foundation for Innovation in Democracy, Global Africa, and the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF), the Junior Researchers' Institute aims to foster the emergence of a new generation of scholars on the African continent who are able to contribute to the intellectual project of reinventing democracy, drawing on African archives and territories.

1. The Junior Researchers' Institute

The School is designed for young researchers involved in this project of reinvention and committed to advancing research themes and approaches in order to foster greater porosity between academic research and society. A particular focus will be on enhancing their ability to write articles that valorize their research.

The Institute was initiated to address the following five objectives:

- To serve as a space for training and promoting young researchers, with the aim of building their capacities on the theme of substantive democracy.
- To strengthen their skills in fieldwork and participatory research methodologies.
- To support young researchers in their scientific writing and publishing projects, on topics directly related to the chosen theme.
- To equip them with the tools to produce high-quality articles, publishable in Global Africa and other peer-reviewed journals of strong academic standing.
- To enhance their capacity to valorize and disseminate their research in the media, with the goal of bringing research into society: press, social media, and other platforms.

*The **2025 Session** of the Junior Researchers' Institute will take place from **December 1 to 6, 2025**, in **Saint-Louis (Senegal)**. It will be held under the theme: **Regenerating Democracy: Capabilities, Commons & Care**.*

2. Rationale

Our century is marked by what is often called a "**polycrisis**": the entanglement of ecological, social, and political crises that are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The increasing pressure of human activity on ecosystems has led to a profound alteration of major biogeochemical cycles. Climate change and its cascading effects—the collapse of biodiversity, water and air pollution, and soil degradation—demonstrate that humanity has become a geological force, capable of transforming the planet in the same way as natural phenomena (Meadows et al., 2017; Haraway, 2015; Neubert, 2020; Ofstehage, 2021; Mbembe, 2023).

Polycrisis of the Living

Recent research has conceptualized these various forms of exploitation and depletion of life through terms such as the "**Anthropocene**," "**Capitalocene**," "**Plantationocene**" (Haraway & Tsing), and "**Brutalism**" (Mbembe, 2023). These notions express a brutal mode of transforming and destroying nature, social structures, and bodies. According to Mbembe, we have entered the era of the "combustion of the world" (2023), which accelerates the decline of human systems and poses a threat to collective survival (Wolford, 2021; Davis, 2021).

Interwoven with this are a social and health crisis (inequalities, pandemics, conflicts, etc.) and a major **democratic crisis**. For the first time in two decades, there are more authoritarian regimes than democracies worldwide (Angiolillo, Good God & Lindberg, 2025). This democratic backsliding particularly affects Africa, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and South Asia.

Contemporary democracies are undergoing a profound crisis, marked by several common features: citizen disaffection, weakened representative institutions, and an inability to respond effectively to ecological and social emergencies. In Africa, the crisis is exacerbated by limited citizen inclusion, rising inequalities, and vulnerabilities further intensified by climate, economic, and conflict-related crises. These tensions reveal the limits of a model—liberal democracy—understood primarily as an electoral mechanism, often imported and largely disconnected from African social realities.

The current polycrisis, however, is not limited to climate or political imbalances; it also manifests as a **crisis in relationships** between humans, societies, states, and nature. This is also a **crisis of care** (Tronto, 1994, 2009): we lack collective mechanisms for caring for one another and for the Earth that sustains us. Donna Haraway (1988, 2016) has shown how the life sciences have often reinforced the objectification of living beings, relying on patriarchal, capitalist, and racial perspectives. This worldview has helped legitimize ecological exploitation and degradation. In response, critical approaches insist on the intrinsic value of natural entities and the need to recognize their dignity (Larrère, 2010).

These critiques also denounce the reign of dominance over cooperation—the hallmark of neoliberal capitalist system—and are part of a broader movement that reclaims the importance of the **commons**: shared resources managed collectively (Ostrom, 2002, 2010; Coriat, 2013, 2015; Hardt & Negri, 2012; Dardot & Laval, 2016). The commons are built on principles of cooperation, adaptability, and sustainability, and offer alternatives to dominant proprietary model.

The domination of humans over other humans and over nature constitutes a major obstacle to safeguarding freedoms of choice and action. Hence the importance of nurturing **capabilities** as a way to reclaim the agency that is essential to substantive democracy.

Three Conceptual Resources: *Capabilities, Commons, and Care*

To confront the polycrisis, three notions appear particularly fruitful. They offer leverage points for rebuilding social and ecological bonds in a world in crisis:

Capabilities

Amartya Sen defines capabilities as the real freedoms individuals have to make choices and take action (Sen, 1980, 1985, 1999, 2002). This framework goes beyond a strictly economic view of development, emphasizing autonomy, agency, and justice (Martins, 2006; Pellé, 2009).

Commons

The work of **Elinor Ostrom** (2002, 2010) and **Bernard Coriat** (2013, 2015) has shown that local communities can collectively and sustainably govern natural or informational resources. The commons represent an alternative to privatization and commodification, emphasizing cooperation and shared governance.

Care

Care (Tronto, 1994, 2009; Molinier, Laugier & Paperman, 2009) refers to an ethic and practice of care, attentive to both human and non-human vulnerabilities. It involves recognizing interdependence and valuing the often invisible labor of sustaining and protecting life (Machikou, 2024).

In light of the challenges described above, it is urgent to rethink the foundations of democratic life. From this perspective, the three concepts—care, commons, and capabilities—offer critical resources and renewed perspectives. They place interdependence, shared responsibility, and the realization of freedoms at the heart of political reflection, thereby opening pathways to a regenerated democracy in the African context.

Indeed, many African systems of thought show that, as a creative force, democracy, understood substantively, serves life, community, and the living world. A democratic community is a community of care—for bodies, minds, institutions, habitats and environments, and the relationships between humans and beyond. To regenerate its vital potential, the democratic community requires the constant renewal of generations. It is grounded in the values of the Matrimoines and demands skills that can only be cultivated within new learning communities.

3. Toward a Regeneration of Democracy

These concepts—or the philosophies they carry—are also being articulated in several emerging approaches aimed at constructing a form of democracy committed to social justice, political inclusion, and the support of all life forms. Notable examples include:

- Convivial conservation, which seeks to protect biodiversity while respecting local communities (DeVore, Hirsch & Paulson, 2019; Gill, 2021).
- Practices of self-exposure and vernacular resistance, which express alternative ways of relating to the world (Hirsch, 2015; Maat & Hazareesingh, 2016; Whyte, 2018; Luste Boulbina, 2025).
- The re-emergence of physiocracy, or governance by nature (Orain, 2023), and the repoliticization of the economy through the commons (Dupuis, 2012).

These approaches contribute to the development of substantive democracy—one that recognizes the interdependence between humans and non-humans, and that places practices of care and sharing at the foundation of collective life.

4. Priority Research Axes

The 2025 Junior Researchers' Institute invites participants to explore these issues through three main axes: **capabilities**, **commons**, and **care**. The goal is to reflect on how these concepts can be articulated together to address the challenges of regenerating and reinventing democracy in African contexts.

Priority lines of inquiry and reflection include:

- **How is substantive democracy concretely** built in countries where the majority of the population consists of unemployed youth and women; where, in the face of multiple forms of risk, most people lack security or protection; and where informal struggles for subsistence are the driving force behind social and collective life ?
- How can **care**, **commons**, and **capabilities** be articulated to address the crisis of legitimacy and effectiveness that affects African democracies?
- **What are the empirical foundations of the links** between capabilities, commons, and care? And how does this articulation manifest in your case study or fieldwork?
- **Starting from African field contexts**, how can an interdisciplinary dialogue be organized across these concepts—drawn from economic philosophy, sociology, political theory, and law?
- Do these three notions today constitute an arc of agency capable of confronting the systemic collapse?
- From the local to the global scale, what are the sites and non-sites of this reinvestment?

5. Application Guidelines

Applications must be submitted by email to the following address: **communication@laspad.org**

6. The Application File Must Include:

A manuscript (minimum 10 pages) clearly indicating:

- (1) the research topic;
- (2) a state of knowledge or literature review on the topic;
- (3) the research problem or key questions guiding the project;
- (4) the chosen research methods;
- (5) one letter of recommendation from your supervisor;
- (6) Proof of enrollment in a doctoral program or a research-creation PhD.

7. Dates

- **Application deadline:** September 10 – October 25, 2025 (midnight UTC)
- **Notification of results:** November 5, 2025
- **The School will take place from** December 1 to 6, 2025, at Gaston Berger University Saint Louis (Senegal)

8. Coverage of Expenses

All costs will be covered by **the Democracy Innovation Foundation, Global Africa**, and the **Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF)**.

9. Working Languages

The working languages are French and English.

10. Participant Eligibility

The 2025 session will bring together participants from across Africa. Priority will be given to early-career researchers who made progress in their work (doctoral candidates with at least one publication), postdoctoral researchers, and beyond), and who are seeking spaces for critical reflection as well as research and dissemination tools to strengthen their capacity to the project of reimagining democracy in Africa.

11. Selection Criteria

Sixteen applications will be selected based on candidates' ability to:

- clearly identify and justify their research topic in relation to the session's theme,
- articulate their research problem and questions,
- provide details on the methods they intend to use.

Special consideration will be given to projects involving fieldwork, especially those that explicitly specifying how such fieldwork will be carried out.

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