

WISER INVITES PROPOSALS FOR A TWO-YEAR RESEARCH PROGRAM (2020-2022) ON MOBILE SPACES, POROUS BORDERS, AND PATHWAYS OF REGIONALIZATION

Thanks to generous funding from Carnegie Foundation (USA) and the Gerda Henkel Foundation (Germany), WISER is launching a major interdisciplinary and multi-regional research program called **Regions2050: Mobile spaces, porous borders, and pathways of regionalization**.

Coordinated by **Professor Achille Mbembe**, the Program includes 34 researchers and straddles the traditional divide between Francophone, Anglophone, Arabophone and Lusophone scholarly communities. It also transcends the divide between Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa while reconnecting the African continent to the Southern Atlantic and Indian Oceanic worlds.

This multi-regional research program's goal is to unlock the paradoxes of regionalization in a setting, the African continent, shaped by multiple porous borders and mobile spaces. Instead of assuming that regionalization is tied to state territoriality, it examines the ways in which frontiers and horizons - spatial, material, cultural and imaginary - are increasingly produced by the intersection of cross border flows, networks and informal institutions that are not delineated by states only, but also by technological devices of all kinds and by movement as such.

The Program's aim is to foster a new understanding of the ongoing geographies of regionalization that arise from: (1) the intensification of mobility, flows and circulation in a context of porous borders, mobile spaces and technological transformations; (2) the accelerated extraction and use of natural resources that has been taking place in Africa over the last century and a half, its historical pathways and the socio-ecological transformations it has unleashed; (3) the mutations in causes of illness (epidemics) and the way the crisis of climate is reshaping the human/ecological/environment relationships.

In this Program, the two concepts of the *mobile space* and *porous borders* serve as broad conceptual indexes that will be used to distinguish between (1) different types of mobilities/circulation/speed and different types of borders; (2) the cultural and institutional forms generated by such movements; and (3) the technological, ecological and spatial reconfigurations that arise in the context of increasing informalization and transnationalization of life forms and processes.

We invite research proposals from early-mid career researchers for inclusion in a two-year research program on "Regions2050: Mobile space, porous borders, and pathways of regionalization".

The candidates must already be in possession of their doctoral degree. Successful candidates will be paid an honorarium. They will belong to a team, but are expected to remain in their home institution from where they will conduct their research.

They will be expected to: (1) fully participate in the research program and in its publications; (2) take part in the scientific events and other activities relevant to their research (advanced seminars, workshops, round tables, experimental syllabus); (3) produce 2 podcasts or op-eds per year; (4) publish one final chapter to be included in an edited volume.

We seek candidates with different skills and training backgrounds who are willing to work on highly innovative research projects (borders, mobility, speed, circulation of people, objects, ideas and technological devices, ecological transformations, regional transport systems, markets and small towns, cross-border practices, media and digital corridors; cultural and literary scapes; logistics, multi-species interactions; health ecologies and pandemics; trans-regional extraction, enclaves and offshoring etc.).

Applications are opened to international candidates. African and diasporic candidates are strongly encouraged to apply.

REQUIREMENTS

Applications should include:

- A letter of motivation (2 pages maximum)
- A CV
- A highly innovative research proposal (4 pages maximum)
- A certified copy of a Ph.D.
- Two reference letters
- A written sample of academic work

DURATION

The program runs from October 30, 2020 to October 30, 2022.

DEADLINE

Applications should be sent electronically to Najibha Deshmukh, Senior Administrator, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (Najibha.Deshmukh@wits.ac.za)

The deadline for application is September 4. Results will be published on **September 11, 2020.**

The research program includes 4 Clusters: (1) Sahel/Sahara/Mediterranean; (2) Congo Basin; (3) Southern Atlantic/Indian Oceanic Africa; (4) African Technoscapes.

A candidate is only allowed to apply in one Cluster. A presentation of the clusters can be found [here](#).

REGIONS2050 FOUR CLUSTERS

The forces that define the contemporary condition as Anthropocene, such as global warming, species extinction or pandemics, are more volatile, indeterminate and unpredictable because they are planetary. In Africa in particular, these dynamics have unleashed new spatial reconfigurations. They are reshaping internal and external borders while paving the way for novel forms of mobility and multiple speeds. In the process, old regional formations are remade and unmade while new ones are emerging. Mapping these dynamics and their various determinants calls for an urgent reformulation of a whole set of assumptions, categories and concepts which have until recently served as the bedrock of scientific inquiries into local conditions.

| Sahel/Sahara/Mediterranean |

From a historical perspective, the Sahel, the Sahara and the Mediterranean form a single space of movement which should be considered as a continuum. The Sahara in particular should be seen as “the second face of the Mediterranean” and as such interpreted as a space of connection rather than a space of insulation.

This Cluster will focus on informal practices and commercial exchanges which perform connective functions across this region. We will look into various ways in which the cross-border networks revolving around specific connective sites and portals foster the emergence of new and unofficial spatial orders. Particular attention will be devoted to markets and small towns. Markets in particular are critical in connecting small towns with their rural hinterlands. Rurally sourced goods flow through historically established small towns and regional markets to national and international markets. How are market places and networks created? What role do social networks play in their creation? To what extent their creation and the way they operate is shaped by the hybrid forms of governance and the unfolding dynamics of para-statehood or even statelessness?

The multiplicity of forms of mobility and circulation will be the other focus. Underlying various modes of circulation are myriad forms of local and situated knowledge. How are they constituted and transmitted, under what conditions are they deployed and with what effects? How do routes and trails emerge and how are such habitual knowledge cemented? What are the interconnections and similarities

between different forms of movement? What groups or communities propel what types of movements and according to the availability of what types of resources? To what extent is the alleged dichotomy of sedentary and nomadic mobility challenged and combined with more open conceptions of space and place?

| The Congo Basin |

One of the largest *ecoregions* in the world, the Congo Basin constitutes a large portion of Africa's biodiversity and is shared by more than 7 territorial nations. With 300 million hectares of land covered by tropical forests (99 percent of which is primary or naturally regenerated), it is the second largest tropical forest area in the world. It is also the single largest peatland complex in the world, storing a significant amount of forest carbon. The Congo Basin forests have, for centuries, performed a significant role in the global carbon cycle (services such as flood control and climate regulation at the local and regional level). The wealth of carbon stored in their abundant vegetation further serves as a buffer against global climate change.

The Congo Basin is also a unique freshwater ecosystem supporting hundreds of millions of people in areas as diverse as the provision of food and materials or trade and exchange. It is also a crucial part of regulating Earth's water cycle. The Basin is among the three prominent convective regions that dominate global rainfall climatology during transition seasons. A remote sensing analysis of its forests reveals that the Basin is at a threshold as it experiences consistent patterns of reduced vegetation greenness and decreased water storage. This hydro-climatic shift is partly the result of extreme droughts, mechanized logging, rotational agriculture and expanding human activities.

In this Cluster, we aim to test the concept of *eco- or biogeographic region*. We intend to build on the work that has already been done in by Earth science research to map the Basin's forest and water ecosystems. Using phenology patterns and light regimes derived from MODIS (Moderate Resolution Image Spectrometer), they have identified 8 distinct forest types, including mangroves and swamps. These distinct forest types are important bio-physical barriers which have isolated distinct species. But they also operate as nodes of connection which allow patterns of species coexistence to emerge. What this coexistence might entail for a *multi species understanding of regionalization* will be at the center of our inquiry.

We will also build on the work done on regional hydrology and hydrodynamics of the waters in the Basin, which shows the extent to which future climate change and land use are likely to affect the overall C cycle of the Basin while increasing CO₂ evasion. This will be mapped against the various ways in which indigenous communities have developed a long and intricate relationship to natural ecosystems while deriving their livelihoods and essential natural resources from this environment. In this Cluster,

we will use a combined methodology: collection of new data where it is possible, reworking and reinterpretation of existing data, conducting targeted research in specific locations.

| Southern Atlantic and Indian Oceanic Africa |

Regionalization processes in Southern Africa will be placed within the broader Southern Hemispheric context (South Atlantic and Indian Ocean in particular). With Eastern Africa, Southern Africa is one of the two main maritime gateways to Asia. Furthermore, it is located at the center of a chain that connects seas and continents while bridging the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. To a large extent, these connections form a sub-global web that reflects unfolding shifts in the pathways of globalization. This Cluster will examine how these shifts are currently perceived, understood and represented, the ways in which they work as a potential alternative to the global North and how they enable the movement of people, goods and ideas.

Through careful descriptive and empirical research, we hope to show how these various types of movements result in the creation of different types of places, boundaries and connections and networks, contributing therefore to original and at times unexpected modes of *de facto* regionalization. Building on the distinction between several forms of movement or mobilities, we hope to better understand the tensions and conflicting dynamics between local spatial strategies based on circulation, routes and connections, networks and flows on the one hand, and on the other State and elite-driven modes of regionalization whose main foundations are national sovereign territories.

| African Technoscapes |

This Cluster will mainly focus on two selected large technical assemblages in the domains of health and environment across Africa and its regions. The two core assemblages selected for scrutiny are quantification (or datafication) and remote sensing (satellite and drone imaging) of the earth. The Cluster will inquire into the ways in which the selected technological assemblages shape the forms and practices of evidence-making in the domains of health and environment and thereby deeply impact daily lives, governance and space-making. Inversely, the Cluster will examine how the technologies in turn are shaped by their particular deployments and usages.

The Cluster will examine in detail how these two techno-scientific assemblages and their methodologies contribute to re-define what health is about, how it is related to the environment and how these re-definitions re-shape governance and the relation between techno-scientific zones and political territories.

In order to deal with these questions, the Cluster will also keep an eye on the ways in which the techno-scientific assemblages foster new forms and senses of individual and collective identities, of belonging and of being in the world. With what myths, desires and symbolic and financial capital are they imbued?

On a more abstract level, the detailed inquiries will be related to the following general questions:

- What regimes of national and non-national sovereignty are they making possible?
- What types of hybrid and connected spaces are they producing?
- What segregated and integrated social worlds are they fostering?
- To what extent are they reconfiguring the regionalization processes of the continent?