



Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa  
Conseil pour le développement de la recherche en sciences sociales en Afrique  
مجلس تنمية البحوث في العلوم الاجتماعية في أفريقيا  
Conselho Para o Desenvolvimento da Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais na África



## 16<sup>th</sup> CODESRIA General Assembly Call for Abstracts and Papers

4 to 8 December 2023  
Dakar, Senegal

**Theme: *The Social Sciences and ‘Pandemics’ in Africa***

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) will hold its 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Dakar, Senegal from 4 to 8 December 2023. The Council has selected the theme ‘*The Social Sciences and “Pandemics” in Africa*’ for this edition of its triennial General Assembly. The Assembly combines an academic conference with a business meeting where CODESRIA members discuss, among other things, the work of the Council and those “in good standing” elect a new Executive Committee. This edition of the Assembly will also coincide with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Council.

This Assembly comes, too, at a time defined, at a global level, by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond the biomedical significance of COVID-19, the pandemic represents an epistemic moment, one with major implications for knowledge production globally, and specifically for Africa. It is a moment pregnant with possibilities for making sense of scholarship and how its course has been fundamentally shaped and re-shaped by intellectual labour. It is a moment when scholarship in the social sciences and humanities is grappling with significant changes in society at the sociopolitical and economic levels. Not

only are major global powers experiencing serious economic challenges, but there is a reckoning taking place in the political realm. The democratic experiment has been weakened by an aggressive, conservative and nativistic backlash in the heartland of liberal democracies. The social realities and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fiscal demands it has imposed on economies now manifest in a global economic downturn and a political retaliation against democracy in some parts of the world that all raise important questions for the social sciences and humanities. This disruption invites a rethinking of methodologies of comprehending the rapid changes in society and whether these shifts herald any major transitions or transformation in society.

*If we resist the urge to cast the pandemic as an exceptional event, and instead choose to use it as a lens through which to understand life in Africa (and the rest of the world) as the almost constant negotiation of myriad crises (environmental, financial, economic, social and political), then what could emerge would be an exciting interrogation of the future of the social sciences and humanities.*

At the heart of the myth of origin of the pandemic are two versions: that the virus emerged as an unintended consequence of a research process gone wrong or that it was deliberately fabricated by scientists. Of course, there is the additional version that it was a species transfer from a wild animal to humans. Whichever way one looks at it, the intense focus on the origin of the virus (that is, the ‘moment of original sin’), important as it may be, offers little space for exploring the more fundamental

challenges that the virus unleashed. It occludes a more critical focus on the global spread in general and, most importantly for us, the impact on Africa. Worse, the spread of the virus has occasionally been held hostage by another ‘pandemic’: the unending contestation for the ‘truth of the matter’, which is mired in a deluge of unverified suppositions and speculations. These have significantly influenced the subsequent narrative of the pandemic, demarcated its contours and impeded progress in its control and prevention. Even in the proliferation of the ‘pandemic’ of ‘fake news’, some significant, even uncomfortable, questions have been raised about histories of unethical scientific research, the implications of scientific inquiry in mass atrocities, and the exploitation and abuse of certain populations around the world in the name of science. There is also the issue of the role of Big Pharma, which eventually connects to the drive for superprofits from the prevailing health and medical challenges. Knowledge production grounded in the race to invent cures and vaccines and to understand societal responses to the outbreak has spearheaded the quest for a ‘return to normal’. All these dynamics have played out against the background of intense debates over the authority of science and the legitimacy of the knowledge producer. While for some the knowledge producers carry hope in a time of boundless despair, for others they are a siren luring the world down a dystopian path.

This pandemic has thus been marked by tantalising prospects for the reordering of knowledge production. Quandaries, including pandemic denialism, have compelled an acknowledgement of the role that the social sciences and humanities *can* play in making sense of the dynamics of the pandemic, including dealing with disease outbreaks and shedding light on the multifaceted nature of its spread, mutation and effects. However, the social sciences and humanities are still often perceived as subsidiaries to STEM – areas of study worth invoking only when the natural and biological sciences arrive at a dead end. The need to fundamentally understand the pandemic as a sociopolitical reality instead of a biomedical one persists. This calls for a fundamental rethinking of the enduring problematic compartmentalisation of fields of knowledge, and to breach disciplinary boundaries through interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary frameworks.

The evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa, with lower-than-expected case and fatality numbers, puzzled the world. *The Economist*, for example, expressing doubt over the death toll reported by African countries, went into modelling mode and reached the

conclusion that the estimated number of global deaths was at least 2.1 to 3.8 times more than official figures. Not only are we terribly unsure of the numbers of fatalities that have resulted from COVID-19 globally, the multiplicity of hypotheses proposed to make sense of this situation deserve exploration. Still, we know enough to argue that those widespread expectations that the pandemic would evolve in Africa in ways very different from the path it took urge a rededication to the task of interrogating the persistent scholarly and public sphere representation of the continent as a place of lack, disaster, incompetence and helplessness. The actual outcome forces a rethinking of the tendency to view the pandemic primarily through the lens of biomedicine to thinking about it using the metaphor of disruption. This in turn has ushered in a new way of looking at the future: rather than a ‘return to normal’ there is now increased emphasis on moving into ‘a new normal’.

This is an acknowledgement that, underneath the disruption and discontinuity that has characterised the pandemic in deeply intimate spheres as well as those that are very public, the old ingenuity and adaptive mechanisms with which African populations have dealt with previous health, social, political and environmental crises have been working. Deep structural factors, such as poverty, gender inequality, xenophobia and the abuse of state authority not only in Africa but also in the rest of the world have significantly shaped the course of the pandemic. Then there are global inequalities that have been all too grossly apparent in the distribution of vaccines, with ‘vaccine apartheid’ emerging as the single most important reminder to developing economies that they are on their own. Worse still were the clear instances of European duplicity that manifested in questions around intellectual property rights as they relate to the issue of access to treatment and the distribution of virus-testing tools and vaccines. In most cases, the preference for using African bases as sites to assemble kits produced elsewhere rather than as sites of production themselves contributed to stunting, eroding or undermining the production base of African economies, including some like South Africa, whose capacity to handle such tasks is well developed. Ultimately, these experiences raise the question of the extent to which the pandemic fundamentally altered social dynamics instead of reinforcing long-existing structures and processes. Or did the pandemic reshape those structural factors in ways that might not have been anticipated? At stake here is the ability of scholarship in the social sciences and hu-

manities to delve below the surface to interrogate deep structures, their ability to survive shocks, their capacity to tolerate and even benefit from jolts, and their capability to mask themselves and their workings.

As an epistemic moment, the pandemic represents an important event against which to read and question the evolution of social research. Much has been made once again of the need for scholarship in the social sciences and humanities to prove their relevance by helping societies *to restore a normal future*. The pandemic also presents an excellent opportunity to interrogate the conditions of possibility of work in these scholarly fields in times of crisis. If we resist the urge to cast the pandemic as an exceptional event, and instead choose to use it as a lens through which to understand life in Africa (and the rest of the world) as the almost constant negotiation of myriad crises (environmental, financial, economic, social and political), then what could emerge would be an exciting interrogation of the future of the social sciences and humanities.

In its quest to explore SSH in this transitional moment, CODESRIA invites papers that use the pandemic as a prism to explore knowledge production in the social sciences and humanities in and on Africa; or that employ the social sciences and humanities as a framework for making sense of the pandemic, with particular focus on the ways in which long-standing processes and dynamics shape, are influenced by, and manifest themselves during such an event. We also invite papers that, in addition to interpreting the notion of pandemic, are interested in the metaphor of ‘pandemic’ as a state of devastating crisis and decline that has all too often characterised key sectors of African politics and economies, from the welfare sectors like education and health, to public works and mining that historically have been poorly regulated. The persisting conflicts in some regions of Africa reflect this metaphorical pandemic in which local interests and their ties to global chains have disrupted communities, destroyed the environment, undermined livelihoods and rendered people’s lives a crushing ‘pandemic’ experience.

### The Council invites papers on the following themes:

1. Social Sciences and Humanities in times of crises
2. Pandemics as metaphors of disruptions in society
3. History, epidemics and pandemics
4. Recreating the pandemic experience
5. The pandemic and interdisciplinarity
6. African perspectives on epidemics and pandemics
7. Knowledge, arts and epidemics
8. Writing about the pandemic
9. Epidemics and inequalities
10. Structure, agency and the evolution of epidemics
11. The gendered dimension of epidemics and pandemics
12. Pandemics, identity and the question of citizenship
13. Disease, travel and movement
14. Pandemics, labour and livelihoods in Africa
15. Pandemics, epidemics and imperatives of social transformation
16. The other contagions: beyond the biomedical
17. Reflections on age and pandemics
18. Pandemic in the digital age
19. The media and the pandemic.



Those wishing to be considered for participation in the 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly to present papers or as convenors of panels are invited to submit abstracts or panel proposals by 15 April 2023. The Council will contact authors of successful abstracts by 15 May 2023, expecting them to submit their papers by 15 July 2023. The Council will inform successful candidates by 30 August 2023. Abstracts for paper presentations should not exceed 500 words while panel proposals

should not exceed 800 words. Each should clearly indicate the sub-theme in which the paper or panel is located.

All applications should be submitted through the webpage:

<https://16thgeneralassembly.codesria.org>

Submissions by email will not be accepted.