

Fieldwork Bursaries for registered PhD Students based in Gauteng, South Africa

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

Deadline: 23:59 on Monday the 9th of November

The Beyond Binaries project, a collaboration between the University of the Witwatersrand School of Social Sciences, IRD—the French National Research Institute for sustainable development, and IFAS-Research, invites current PhD students registered at Gauteng-based South African universities to apply for one of ten R10,000 fieldwork bursaries. These bursaries can be put towards expenses associated with fieldwork and ethnographic research – interviews, participant-observation, focus groups etc – to support the successful completion of doctoral dissertations. This is a fieldwork specific call, with the ultimate goal being to support the next generation of researchers who are doing innovative and original fieldwork in Africa. All disciplines within the Humanities, broadly conceived, are welcome here.

The Beyond Binaries project responds to the inadequacy of entrenched binaries—north/south, west/rest, civilized/uncivilized—in explaining today's interconnected challenges, from climate change and pandemics to authoritarianism and economic inequality. Instead, it explores global circuits of influence and exchange, where ideas, practices and solidarities circulate multi-directionally, disrupting deficit framings of Africa and Eurocentric knowledge economies. Further readings and resources relating to fieldwork, ethics, methods and partnerships can be found [here](#).

To apply for a fieldwork bursary you need to:

- [Complete an application form via this hyperlink](#). Your fieldwork plan should include a rough sense of how you propose to spend the available funding. You should also outline how you intend address larger questions relating to [research ethics and knowledge production](#) as part of your planned fieldwork. If your fieldwork takes place in another African country you will also need to confirm how you will resolve any national requirements associated with getting your research officially approved.
- **Email 1) your current CV and 2) your ethics approval paperwork/certificate** to Beth (bdaviesk@gmail.com) and CC amayelle.pendeoro@frenchinstitute.org.za.

Applicants must be:

- Prepared to complete your funded fieldwork by July 2027.
- Based in Gauteng and available to travel to Wits for events associated with the project. For the 2027 round we are specifically focusing upon fieldwork safety and ethical research practices, with a conference on these topics provisionally scheduled for mid 2027.
- Prepared to draft a short paper which reflects upon your fieldwork experiences.

We look forward to hearing about your fieldwork! Successful applicants will be notified by late November.
If you have any questions, please contact Beth (above).

Beyond Binaries: Global Circuits of Influence, Exchange and Knowledge Production

This project is organised around three main themes:

- *Global circuits of influence and exchange* – moving beyond binaries to rethink power, hierarchy, solidarity and patterns of global influence.
- *Transformation and decolonization* – finding ways to integrate decolonial theory with decolonial praxis, and thereby prevent the reduction of decolonisation to a self-selecting theoretical abstraction.
- *Fieldwork, knowledge and partnership* – confronting extractive practices, the possibilities and pitfalls of partnership, imagining equitable collaboration, and interrogating funding streams and their effects.

This funding call is primarily focused on the third and final theme focusing upon fieldwork. It starts with the now familiar disconnect between scholarship “on” Africa and the work and activism of scholars based “in” and working “from” Africa. This disconnect casts a long shadow over how and why research data and arguments and analysis end up being generated, validated, and disseminated. This is not simply a methodological question. It is also a far-reaching ethical and political challenge.

Within Africa, fieldwork often brings to mind the figure of the “native informant”, who is typically positioned as an unacknowledged assistant/broker/translator for European experts who show up at “exotic” locations for short trips to ask locals questions and then return home to build their careers. In recent decades there have been numerous attempts to move from extraction to equity. These include projects focusing on training local researchers, paying researchers and respondents fairly, naming all researchers involved in published outputs, and structuring projects and outputs in ways that respond to/reflect local priorities and perspectives, such as participatory action research. These kinds of initiatives directly respond to decolonial models and critiques, but they have also run up against entrenched power structures and hierarchies. Decolonising fieldwork is one of those things that gets treated as a discretionary choice. Some researchers try for equity. Others continue with extraction. Some researchers argue that it is best practice to materially compensate respondents for their time and expertise. Others respond with bewilderment when the issue of compensation comes up.

Fieldwork and research are often undertaken by teams and international networks, rather than singular individuals, which in turn raises difficult questions about the nexus between partnership and knowledge production. Partnerships come in many different forms. In the best possible scenario, parties come together as freely consenting equals over an agreed upon project in which they have mutual interest, and from which they can derive mutual benefit. Yet very few real-world partnerships actually align with this scenario. The key sticking points are once again power and position. Some partners invariably have a much larger voice than others when it comes to priorities, funding, project design, and outputs. As a general rule, international partnerships are organized along two main axes: 1) partnerships between academics in different corners of the globe, and 2) partnerships that reach beyond the ivory tower to include business, civil society, government, and/or international

organizations. While these partnerships sometimes emerge organically, their overall design and operation tends to be strongly affected by both funding streams and institutional hierarchies. This has never been a straightforward meritocracy, wherein the most compelling ideas and proposals rise to the top of the pile, but instead needs to be understood in sociological terms.

Most funding for international partnerships comes from wealthy countries. And this is also where funds tend to be administered and audited. As Loren Landau has argued, this creates incentives for research partners based in Africa to gravitate toward short-term “piece work”, where researchers are commissioned or subcontracted to execute a small piece of a larger project, yet have little or no capacity to influence the design of the whole. This, in turn contributes to “a global division of labour where southerners become data collectors while northerners produce knowledge and offer scholarly and policy critiques” (Landau 2012, 563). And since this “piece work” is frequently short term, there are further incentives to produce results that align with expectations since this is the most likely route to future commissions. Anything too “radical” or “unconventional” to funders is unlikely to find favour.

By zooming in on practices of knowledge production, particularly about the African continent and research on Africa writ large, this project seeks to open space for discussions around ethics, methods, and knowledge economies which speak to decolonial priorities in both practical and strategic terms (decolonisation is more than theoretical abstraction). By emphasizing the importance of situated knowledge and cultural context, we want to explore possibilities for sharing best practices and mutual learning across disciplinary, institutional, national and continental boundaries. We do not expect to be able to transcend existing hierarchies and power structures anytime soon, but we do hope to be able to expose their effects and identify alternative pathways.

For the 2027 version of our project we are especially concerned with fieldwork safety and ethical research practices. We are therefore looking to explore the following questions and issues:

- How should universities and other actors both plan for and respond to dangers and dilemmas encountered in the field?
- What kinds of practical guidance and strategies would help staff and students when it comes to planning and implementing their fieldwork ahead of time?
- What practical steps and planning are needed to ensure researcher health and safety, especially for younger female researchers?
- How do concerns about safety and risk affect the kinds of data that can and should be collected?
- What are the best ways of successfully negotiating roadblocks, police stops and immigration regimes?
- What kinds of strategies and responses are required if/when the worst happens?
- What kinds of protocols and debriefing measures are required to support researchers once they have returned from the field?
- What kinds of ethical obligations do researchers (and institutions) owe to the individuals and communities where they conduct their research?
- How should researchers respond to requests for, and/or raised expectations of, help from vulnerable individuals while doing fieldwork in impoverished communities?
- When, and how much, should researchers compensate their respondents for their time and expertise?
- How should researchers handle the challenges presented by dominant modes of extractivism and associated knowledge economies?