



# FONDATION LEENAARDS

## **DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA PROGRAMME** For an informed, active and participative society

**Democracy is facing major challenges, in Switzerland as elsewhere. Democracy in our country is under pressure in several ways, from the increasing polarization of debates on major societal and environmental issues, to the erosion of the trust citizens place in political actors and institutions, even though Switzerland is still high by international standards. There are also the challenges to information and the media in the age of social networks and artificial intelligence, not to mention the non-participation of many citizens in democratic life and the rise of authoritarian systems and conflicts in Europe...**

The Foundation is conscious that only functional democracies can provide sustainable responses to global challenges, i.e. democracies that are continually supported and shaped by an informed and committed population. For this reason, on the one hand, it aims **to support active and responsible citizenship** by giving citizens, in all their diversity, the means to contribute to the common good and to feel directly involved in the activities of decision-makers and institutions. On the other hand, it aims **to strengthen the means of receiving, sharing and producing reliable, quality information**, notably through strong, independent and pluralistic local media, as well as training and awareness-raising against fake news and disinformation.

The new program is structured on two themes:

- Support for quality information
- Support for new forms of democracy and citizen participation

### **SUPPORT FOR QUALITY INFORMATION**

*Democracy needs strong, diversified media that provide reliable, high-quality information, promote transparency and vitality in public debate, contextualize events and open perspectives. In a federalist country, it is essential to support this plurality, by maintaining and strengthening the reference media in Western Switzerland, whether generalist or specialist.*

This theme is based on three pillars: **strengthening the quality and independence of content** (support for investigative journalism, reinforcement of good ethical practices), particularly in specialties linked to the Leenaards Foundation's historical areas of science, health and culture; **supporting high-quality regional media and press pluralism in Western Switzerland** (defense of leading French-language titles and support for reflection on innovative, sustainable business models for the sector); and **tackling fake news by raising awareness of information issues and journalistic practices** (school training, fact-checking tools).

**a) Reinforce the quality and independence of content**

Information is produced, prioritized and contextualized by journalists, making it a public good. In its preamble, the [Munich Charter](#) (or Declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists, 1971) states that “The journalists’ responsibility towards the public excels any other responsibility, particularly towards employers and public authorities”. It must therefore be protected by independent deontological institutions such as the Swiss Press Council, which can be contacted by anyone wishing to report possible ethical breaches in the production and dissemination of information.

Quality information must provide the public with access to accurate, verified and understandable data. This is essential to the health of our democracies. This is particularly true when it comes to subjects as complex and polarizing as the climate crisis, which, according to many experts, requires a process of change in the way journalism is done on the same scale as digitalization. In concrete terms, this means developing additional skills in editorial departments, training existing professionals, recruiting new profiles and rethinking communication formats.

**b) Support quality regional media and press diversity in French-speaking Switzerland**

Democracy needs strong, diversified media that provide reliable, high-quality information, create transparency, welcome and contextualize debates and controversies, and outline perspectives. Respecting federalism, this means first and foremost maintaining and consolidating reference media in French-speaking Switzerland, whether general or dedicated to a particular theme, e.g. by continuing our support for the Aventinus Foundation until 2026.

**c) Tackle fake news by raising awareness on information issues and journalistic practices**

The loss of trust in the media has reached worrying levels, particularly among young people (aged 15 to 25), as shown by the FSPJ's April-May 2023 Monitoring of Youth and Politics: only around one in five respondents trust the media, and two in five young people believe that media reports on (concrete) political news are trustworthy. This is, of course, in line with the massive use of social networks as a source of information.

Is it still possible to “save journalism” if not the press, by convincing people that quality information has value and meaning? This question needs to be addressed openly and pragmatically. We need to reach out to the “digital natives” in their multiplied digital worlds, as well as in schools, through regular training courses that enable them to distinguish between public-interest content and commercial or propaganda-oriented communication.

**DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION**

*To complete the system of semi-direct democracy and avoid a certain “democratic fatigue”, new forms of participation in civic life and in the construction of the common good are being tried out. The results are varied but encouraging and include citizens' assemblies and randomly selected citizen panels representative of the population's diversity.*

*In addition to these innovative ways of contributing to public debate, new community practices are taking root in local experiments, producing convincing results in terms of a different kind of civic engagement and the creation of co-managed infrastructures. These “third places” seek to change the relationship between institutions and civil society, between funders and grantees, and ultimately, to rediscover a new way of living in society.* This theme is based on three pillars: **the fight against abstention, particularly among young people** (organization of debates by and for young people, targeted mobilization campaigns); **support for new forms of citizen contribution to major social issues** (randomly selected citizens' assemblies, representative citizens' forums or panels) and a call for projects for **“experimentation with common goods on a local scale”** (third places, community spaces, urban commons).

**a) Tackle abstention among young people**

The abstention figures for young people are worrying: the participation of young people aged 18 to 25 in votes and elections in the canton of Geneva is 15 to 20 percentage points lower than that of older categories: only a quarter of young people express themselves at the ballot box, three quarters abstain. In the canton of Vaud, there are peaks of differences of 40 points between the category of men aged 18-24 and that of men aged 65-80. These low rates of youth participation have even tended to increase over the last twenty-five years. This trend is confirmed by the Monitoring 2023 of Youth and Politics, a survey conducted on behalf of the Swiss Federation of Youth Parliaments (FSPJ) among a thousand young people aged 15 to 25, which concludes, among other things, that most students also feel insufficiently prepared to participate in voting and elections. Before exploring new ways of “building society” and building new forms of collective intelligence, we must better leverage the valuable tools of Swiss semi-direct democracy. This is why it seems appropriate to focus some of our efforts and resources on the segment of the Lake Geneva population that abstains the most.

**b) New forms of citizen contribution on major social issues**

In recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of new forms of participatory deliberation and decision-making known as citizens' assemblies, such as the Swiss Citizens' Assembly for a Food Policy in 2022-2023. Other experiments at a more local level (municipality or canton) have also taken place, particularly in connection with referendums and the understanding/reformulation of their issues by a panel of randomly selected voters. Finally, initiatives independent of public authorities have been launched by civil society organizations on complex issues such as the governance of the Rhône or the reform of the healthcare system to renew highly institutionalized debates or overcome certain partisan blockages.

For Nenad Stojanovic, founder of Demoscan, “the citizens' panel will not replace democratically elected authorities, but it can be a complement. The hypothesis is that the politics of confrontation, as seen in parliaments, generates a lack of interest among certain categories of the population, while that of dialogue, as is the case with our project, attracts categories under-represented in politics.” It would therefore be a question of seeing how these experiences, still marginal in Switzerland, can find their rightful institutional place within the system of semi-direct democracy that they seek to strengthen in the face of the risks of populism and abstentionism.

**c) Experiments with common goods at the local level**

Alongside citizen panels, the rooting of new community practices in local experiments is sometimes yielding surprising results that go well beyond the traditional services provided by associations to populations. It is now a question of evolving the relationships between institutions and civil society, between funders and those funded, and ultimately of rediscovering a new way of building society through *commons* that encourage the power of citizen action. This approach is often associated with the construction and co-

