

# Policy must back social sciences and humanities' global efforts

Europe, like the rest of the world, is witnessing a growing range and intensity of interlocked crises with potentially disruptive consequences for human progress. The crises are economic, social, environmental, political, cultural and moral. These are leading to growing instability and serious threats to peace and social cohesion.

In August, a group of more than 300 leading researchers in the social sciences and humanities from across the globe will publish the first drafts of a report aimed at developing an agenda to address these issues. Researchers, civil-society organisations, politicians and administrations will be encouraged to provide commentary and feedback.

The preliminary report *Rethinking Society for the 21st Century* will feed into a manifesto for social progress—planned for launch in 2017—with a final report published in early 2018. The project is the work of the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP), an effort, in its own words, “to develop research-based, multidisciplinary, non-partisan, action-driven solutions to the most pressing challenges of our time”. These range from democracy and citizenship, the future of work, markets, finance and corporations to global risks and resources.

Research policies, of course, are already striving to address these challenges. The social sciences and humanities are responding to Horizon 2020's emphasis on societal challenges such as climate change and health. Likewise, national programmes are increasingly promoting interdisciplinary collaboration.

**YET THESE RESEARCH PROGRAMMES** remain dominated by a technology-driven approach. Technological ingenuity alone cannot fix the prevalent crises in our economic, social and political systems, or the alarming lack of trust that institutions will tackle them. These developments require deep investigation by researchers in the social sciences and humanities, drawing on empirical observation and the lessons of history.

The strong engagement of leading researchers across the world in the IPSP, and the support provided by prestigious philanthropic foundations such as Volkswagen and Gulbenkian, underlines the gravity of the challenges we are facing. It also represents a clear recognition that knowledge from across the social sciences and humanities is urgently needed to help make sense of our

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complex, uncertain and rapidly changing world. This is a special challenge for the social sciences and humanities, which have operated more in a nation-state framework than the natural sciences, and need now to develop more comparative approaches to yield insights.

The preparation of the IPSP's report will rely heavily on research carried out in national programmes, Horizon 2020 and previous EU Framework programmes. In synthesising and presenting research from a wide range of disciplines, the work of the IPSP is in many respects comparable to that of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

A crucial difference between these panels lies in their capabilities to bring about policy responses. As a non-governmental, bottom-up initiative, the IPSP is arguably more independent. However, while national and international policymaking institutions are formally required to take account of IPCC findings, this is not the case for the IPSP. There are no equivalent predefined policy customers for the IPSP's report and its recommendations.

A global policy initiative based in the social sciences and humanities is urgently needed. The knowledge and ideas provided through the IPSP and other efforts make it much more likely to succeed. Europe is well placed to promote such an initiative, with many established institutions that support and fund the social sciences and humanities—national research councils, Horizon 2020, including the European Research Council, and not least the policy framework of the European Research Area.

The creation of the European Alliance for Social Sciences and Humanities in 2015 is another important step for promoting policy debate across Europe. The alliance can provide a platform for bringing together the main players in these disciplines.

Policymakers and funders must recognise that social sciences and humanities researchers are increasingly ready to address global challenges through concerted efforts. Initiatives such as the IPSP and EASSH need to be supported so that their voices are not only heard but acted upon.

Through its commitment to open science and dialogue with society, Europe can lead a global step change to strengthen the bridges between research and policy. Based on progress under Horizon 2020, the development of Framework 9 could include clear incentives for the social sciences and humanities to embrace a global policy agenda.

*Something to add? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

‘Technological ingenuity alone cannot fix the crises in our social systems.’