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# What could be the contribution of the UNESCO Social and Human Sciences sector?

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Policy Brief

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# Executive summary

The structure and functions of UNESCO are under discussion in the context of both budget reductions and internal review by UNESCO and external review by the UK Government. This discussion includes the nature of the actual and potential contribution of the UNESCO Social and Human Sciences (SHS) Sector. This Policy Brief is a contribution to these discussions. The current situation as to SHS activities and the mission and functions of UNESCO are reported. The views of various stakeholders are reported, based on published statements and invited contributions.

The challenges and dilemmas in the contribution of the UNESCO Social and Human Sciences Sector are reviewed. A tension is identified between, on the one hand, short-term policy impact (visibility) and, on the other hand, the building of capacity in the social sciences in order to deliver improved quality of evidence to support policy making in the longer-term (credibility).

In conclusion, five recommendations are made:

1. The development of the social and human sciences should be one of the key policy goals of UNESCO in general and SHS in particular.
2. The vision of the social sciences in UNESCO should be renewed.
3. There should be a re-balancing away from short-term policy impact (visibility) towards capacity building in the social sciences in order to deliver improved quality of evidence to support policy making in the longer-term (credibility).
4. The five functions of UNESCO should be used to re-articulate its goals and activities in the social sciences: laboratory of ideas; clearing house; standard-setter; capacity-builder; and catalyst for international cooperation.
5. SHS should more directly and effectively cooperate with other bodies that develop social sciences including relevant UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks, and international social science professional associations.

# 1 / Introduction

What should be the contribution of UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences (SHS) Sector?

UNESCO, the United Nations organisation with special responsibility for education, science and culture, has a sector focused on the 'social and human sciences'. The UK will review UNESCO in 2013 as part of its Multilateral Aid Review (MAR); while the UNESCO Executive Board has been discussing the restructuring of SHS during 2012.

The social and human sciences are important for many things in economy and society, for the UK and the world, for development and peace. But what exactly should be UNESCO's role? What should be UNESCO's policy on the social sciences?

This Policy Brief is a contribution to the discussion on the future of Social and Human Sciences in UNESCO, as part of the remit of the UK National Commission for UNESCO to assist reform to improve the effectiveness of UNESCO.

## 2 / Current situation

### What does UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences sector do?

The Social and Human Sciences (SHS) Sector is one of five UNESCO Sectors (the others being education, natural sciences, culture and communication and information). Its mission is: 'to advance knowledge, standards and intellectual cooperation in order to facilitate social transformations conducive to the universal values of justice, freedom and human dignity'. It announces its strategy thus: 'In order to contribute to the development of public policies that will correspond better to changes in society today, UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences Sector acts as a think tank for the world's nations, with the aim of associating all those concerned by its actions in their formulation and implementation'.<sup>1</sup>

SHS has five themes: social transformation (Management of Social Transformation); social inclusion and youth (youth, international migration, fight against discrimination, democracy); ethics, science and society (bioethics, global ethics observatory, global environmental change, anti-doping, physical education and sport); transversal themes (human-rights based approach, philosophy); and global priorities (gender equality, priority Africa).<sup>2</sup> SHS has expected results, performance indicators and benchmarks for its three main lines of action.<sup>3</sup>

### What is UNESCO for?

UNESCO was established in 1945 to contribute to peace through promoting education, science and culture.

'The purpose of the Organization is to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and

culture. To realize this purpose the Organization will . . . Maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge . . . By encouraging cooperation among the nations in all branches of intellectual activity, including the international exchange of persons active in the fields of education, science and culture and the exchange of publications, objects of artistic and scientific interest and other materials of information'. (UNESCO Constitution)<sup>4</sup>

UNESCO has identified five 'functions' that define its unique contribution:<sup>5</sup>

- laboratory of ideas
- clearing house
- standard-setter
- capacity-builder
- catalyst for international cooperation

## UK Government and UNESCO

In the UK, the lead Department for engagement with UNESCO is the Department for International Development (DFID), although other departments and agencies are actively involved. In 2011 there was a critical review of UNESCO as part of the UK Government Multilateral Aid Review (MAR). This placed UNESCO in 'special measures', noting that funding would be withdrawn if performance does not improve. The follow-up evaluation in 2013 will decide if the UK continues funding UNESCO.

The MAR, led from DFID, stresses the importance of developing a robust results-oriented framework in order to deliver impact on the lives of poor people as well as value for money. The DFID Results Framework has four tiers, with the highest tier derived from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).<sup>6</sup> The MAR has five criteria: critical role in meeting development objectives; attention to cross-cutting issues; focus on poor countries; contribution to results; and strategic and performance management.<sup>7</sup> DFID priorities for improvement are: accountability for results; delivery of efficiency savings and value for money in programming; human resource management; transparency and accountability; delivering for women and girls; working in fragile contexts; and partnership behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

## What do stakeholders consider the human and social sciences are for?

There is a range of stakeholders in the role of UNESCO in the social sciences.<sup>9</sup> These include the governments of Member States, and their various departments, which, in the UK, includes DFID; associations of social science in the UK including the British Academy (BA) and the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS); international associations of social science, for example, the International Sociological Association (ISA) and the International Social Science Council (ISSC); universities; other UN agencies; big international foundations; and private companies, such as publishers.

The social and human sciences are important forms of scientific knowledge that are significant for the achievement of many goals. The development of the social sciences is of benefit to the UK and to the global community simultaneously.

Social sciences are a vital part of the economy, for example, they are important to the world-leading UK publishing industry and to world-leading UK universities that recruit high fee paying students from around the world.

Social sciences make an important contribution to the public knowledge essential for democratic processes, supporting processes of accountability, evidence-based evaluation of policies, and the improvement of the quality of decision-making. Examples of these contributions can be seen in relation to policies promoting well-being;<sup>10</sup> positive ageing;<sup>11</sup> sustainability;<sup>12</sup> reducing crime;<sup>13</sup> quality sport and leisure;<sup>14</sup> and good management.<sup>15</sup> Social sciences contribute to informed reflection in public life and thereby to the culture of peace that UNESCO seeks to develop.

UK Government recognises the importance of the development of capacity in social sciences. It does so by funding training and research through research councils, HEFCE and government departments. It recognises the specific contributions of social sciences by the provision of a separate council for funding social science research, the Economic and Social Research Council and through the REF that separately funds excellence in each of the several social science disciplines.

## Views of stakeholders<sup>16</sup>

DFID recognises the importance of ‘world class research’ to provide the

*‘strong evidence base’ that is ‘essential for improving and sustaining the best development and humanitarian outcomes for the poorest’.*<sup>17</sup>

This includes not only the natural sciences and medicine, but also social science to address social issues, for example to improve governance and to counter corruption.

British Academy<sup>18</sup>

*“We welcome DFID’s efforts to build capacity internationally, believing that limited success in this area has in large part been due to the complex nature of capacity building, and the difficulties inherent within this. However, we argue that more could be achieved by a long-term, sustainable approach to activity and by ensuring that strengthening research capacity forms an integral part of the government’s development work. Foremost, the Academy stresses the need to ensure that capacity building is not narrowly defined to refer only to the STEM subjects, and that the value of the humanities and social sciences in addressing development issues be recognised.”*

Prof Cary Cooper CBE, Chair of Council, UK Academy of Social Sciences

*“The development of the capacity of the social sciences is important for the UK and for the global community, in order to achieve a wide range of public benefits. Effective policy development requires a strong and robust infrastructure of institutions to support the contribution of social science to innovation and development.”*

Prof Michael Burawoy, President, International Sociological Association

*“UNESCO played a crucial role in establishing international bodies for the support and pursuit of social science. Today that support is even more desperately needed as the survival of life on our planet faces so many*



*challenges -- from human rights to poverty, from land dispossession to climate change, from the sale of people and their organs to spiralling debt -- whose solutions rests on the recovery of society, on collective working together, on shoring up the social dimension of human existence. Moreover, this social dimension is not limited to local, national or regional scales but reaches global proportions, which is why UNESCO, in particular, has to play an even more important role in supporting a truly global social science."*

International Social Science Council<sup>19</sup>

*"Social sciences are needed to understand and influence how humans act. They are crucial to implement the UN Millennium Development Goals . . . . Hence to face current and future challenges and effectively address global and local problems, more and better social science is vital. To cope, capacity must be built, particularly in the regions where social problems are most acute and social science is most anaemic."*

Stephen Barr, President, SAGE International

*"The social sciences are important both in themselves, as a rigorous, disciplined scrutiny of the fundamental aspects of human behaviour, societies, and economies; and for their impact as the underpinning for a much wider range of disciplines and areas of professional practice, ranging from evaluation research through human services to business and management. They are essential to the development of healthy cultures and an educated public, and are key to addressing the many challenges the world faces, from climate change through poverty and inequality to economic growth and political development. Social science publishing is also an area in which the UK is a major international leader. UK universities' social science departments are internationally prestigious, and UK social science publishers have a global reach. With respect to SAGE UK's social science journal publishing, 89% of the market is outside the UK, with 44% in North America, 23% in Europe, 13% in Asia, and 8% in the rest of the world. This global impact of content published from the UK is both a mark of intellectual leadership, and a significant generator of jobs in the UK and export earnings for the UK. The global market results from sustained international and interdisciplinary exchanges of ideas, learning*

*and knowledge. Institutions such as UNESCO are important enablers of this ongoing dialogue.”*

## Challenges in the SHS remit and practice

A range of goals has emerged within SHS. There is a dilemma as to whether to prioritise visible practical contributions to immediate policy for development or long-term building of the capacity of social science to underpin the development of the knowledge base needed for effective policy development and implementation:

- Immediate policy impact or longer-term development of and capacity building in social science
- Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) or human rights, justice and democracy
- Individual countries and Member States (development focus) or the global level (contemporary social science is globally, not nationally, organised for greater effectiveness)
- Visibility or credibility (of SHS)
  - Short-term and easily measureable impact or long-term deeper impact
  - Impact on policy or impact on the knowledge base that ultimately informs policy

# 3 / Options

## What should be UNESCO's role in the social and human sciences?

Logically there are two options: no change; renew and reform.

- No change: The social science sector in UNESCO is too important and too costly to ignore and leave alone.
- Renew and reform: This option is explored below.
  - Renew the vision for the social sciences in UNESCO while staying close to UNESCO's Constitutional aims and noting the significance of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
  - Implementing the renewed vision through reform articulated through the five functions of UNESCO: laboratory of ideas; clearing house; standard-setter; capacity-builder; and catalyst for international cooperation.

## Renewing the vision for social science

**Social science is science** – Its purpose is the improvement of knowledge. The better the knowledge base, the better the decisions that are made about alternative courses of action. Government is better when policy making is 'evidence-based'. Democracy is better when the public is well-informed. Peace is more likely when people have better understanding of different ways of life. Well-being, economic growth and good health are more likely with more science, including social science. Many of the world's problems are social. Social science has important contributions to make to solve these problems and is needed for progress.

**Social science requires institutions** – Social science is not easy. It requires people with skills and training. It requires practices in which expert judgement is respected over prejudice and short-run advantage. It requires specialised practices and institutions to support its existence. It depends upon practices of critique; ‘peer-review’; and appointment and promotion on grounds of scientific merit. These depend upon the existence of universities, journals, conferences and expert funding bodies. Social science is slowly cumulative. Institutions take many years to develop into forms that allow social science to realise its potential.

**Basic disciplines and societal challenges** – Basic disciplines are needed. They are the foundation on which the excellence and advancement of social science rests. They are the basis on which societal challenges can be effectively addressed. Disciplines are not archaic anachronisms, but rather have a function in ensuring that knowledge is steadily cumulative, as a consequence of incremental advances made through the rigorous application of scientific methods. Social science should not only respond to the pressures of immediate challenges, though this is also important. Disciplines are not to be taken for granted or dismissed as mere silos and artificial divisions of knowledge. Disciplines are the communities through which science is self-regulating and through which normal science progresses. When there is excellence in the basic disciplines, then societal challenges can be effectively addressed by inter-disciplinary teams.

**Social science and natural sciences** – Social science has a relationship with other sciences that is simultaneously cooperative and competitive. In many projects that address contemporary global challenges a mix of disciplines, both social and natural sciences, is required. However, it is important not to subordinate the social to the natural sciences institutionally by merging them, since this would significantly reduce the ability of social sciences to make its unique contribution, not least because the funding of science usually dwarfs that for social science. The continued effective contribution of the social sciences to challenges that need multi-disciplinary contributions depends upon it having its own institutional, resource and disciplinary base.

## UNESCO's five functions in social science

It is important to address the development of social science. The development of the systems and institutions needed to create and support social science is a policy issue in its own right. Turning too quickly to the policy impact of research findings underestimates the significance and difficulty of the development of the social science itself. The systems and institutions needed for social science are not yet fully established everywhere.

Social science took over a century to develop the institutions it needs in the developed world. It is needed more quickly than that elsewhere. There is a challenge to develop social science in locations where it is still under-institutionalised. There is a tension between inappropriately reproducing models made in the North and so localising knowledge production that it does not take advantage of globally available expertise. UNESCO is uniquely placed to speed the development of social science around the whole world, not just the parts that are privileged, in ways that are sensitive to local context while not losing globally available insights. This can be done by deploying all of UNESCO's five functions.

### **Laboratory of ideas**

UNESCO's function as a laboratory of ideas could involve scoping, building and supporting social science research agendas. This could involve academics, networks, international organisations or associations, funding bodies and policy makers. UNESCO is potentially well-placed to assist social scientific cooperation on global priorities. For example, UNESCO's global priorities of 'Africa' and 'gender equality' appear to receive little priority in SHS's activities as a laboratory of ideas. Yet, Africa and gender equality also overlap with the MDGs, since Africa is a location of much extreme poverty and high maternal death while gender equality is an MDG in its own right. An example of successful global scientific cooperation has been that around climate change – this could be copied in the social sciences. The ambition could be large-scale, linking global players in social science in the pursuit of globally established goals.

## **Clearing house**

UNESCO could be the place to go to find out about international social science, offering links into and between international social science bodies around the world. While even a web-based resource would be useful, more important would be the use of UNESCO's global position to enable and encourage institutions and networks to engage with each other in the pursuit of shared goals. An effective clearing house would support researchers in producing relevant research to global standards.

## **Standard setter**

UNESCO could provide a model of high standards to use scientific criteria in its awards of Chairs, Networks, Centres and relevant Prizes, offering a public code of practice. UNESCO could have a role in setting standards for the institutional supports of academic independence that are necessary for the development of expert judgement free of political pressure.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics has developed practices to ensure the quality of the statistics available in education. This model could be extended into other topics, so that statistics and indicators become available to enable the monitoring of progress in the development of social science and science more generally.

## **Capacity building**

Capacity building in social science is the basic need for international social science. This is needed within rigorous disciplinary frameworks so as to enable long-term cumulative building of knowledge through the development of methodology and core scientific work. UNESCO is uniquely placed to catalyse this capacity building and to facilitate the transfer of resources and exchange of expertise from North to South as well as South-South in order to achieve this. This would involve engagement with existing bodies to develop this through exchanges, transfers, fellowships, conferences, and co-sponsorship.

## Catalyst for international cooperation

UNESCO could be much more effective as a catalyst for international cooperation in social science. UNESCO is uniquely placed to facilitate cooperation between international bodies, which is important for capacity building, standard setting, sharing, and developing new research agendas. Historically, UNESCO assisted the development of international social science associations, such as the International Sociological Association (ISA) and International Social Science Council (ISSC); and still receives much goodwill as a consequence. But in recent years its direct engagement has shifted to more local and national levels, while aspects of international coordination have been outsourced to the ISSC. This shift does not engage UNESCO's unique strength as a globally legitimated organisation, which is thereby under-utilised.

UNESCO could have much more to contribute to the development of international cooperation in the social sciences. UNESCO could have greater influence if it engaged directly with international social science associations and their efforts to build capacity. It could make a significant impact if it assisted these associations to engage with international funders and international policy makers in the construction of new research agendas. This is much more than the simple knowledge transfer from academics to policy makers currently supported by UNESCO, since it involves the development of the research agendas themselves. UNESCO could be the influential central node in a network of networks, facilitating North-South links, exchanges, and capacity building.

In addition, UNESCO has its own branded resources that could be engaged more energetically for international cooperation, including UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks, and UNESCO Category 2 Centres. The Chairs in particular are an under-utilised resource, yet offer extensive goodwill, contacts, networks and *pro bono* labour. The International Social Science Council (ISSC), founded by UNESCO, which produces the *World Social Science Report*<sup>20</sup> co-published with UNESCO, offers an example of coordination of networks and the development of new research agendas.

# 4 / Recommendations

1. The development of the social and human sciences should be a key goal of UNESCO in general and SHS in particular.
2. The vision of the social sciences in UNESCO should be renewed.
3. There should be a re-balancing away from short-term policy towards long-term capacity building in the social sciences.
4. The five functions of UNESCO should be used to re-articulate its goals and activities in the social sciences: laboratory of ideas; clearing house; standard-setter; capacity-builder; and catalyst for international cooperation.
5. SHS should more directly and effectively cooperate with other bodies that develop social sciences including relevant UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN networks, and international social science professional associations.



# 5 / Acknowledgements

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The views expressed are those of the UK National Commission for UNESCO and do not necessarily reflect those of UK Government or the individuals or organisations who have contributed to this report.

# 6 / Endnotes

- 1 The mission and strategy are detailed on the SHS website: [www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/about-us/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/about-us/)
- 2 The themes are detailed on the SHS website: [www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/)
- 3 UNESCO C/5 Approved Programme and Budget 2012/3.
- 4 UNESCO Constitution. Plans and budgets for the work of SHS and other UNESCO sectors (education, natural sciences, culture, and communication and information) are approved every two years by Member States at a General Conference of UNESCO, see C/5 Approved Programme and Budget 2012/3.
- 5 These are noted in UNESCO Internal Oversight Service *Evaluation of UNESCO Priority Africa*. IOS/EVS July 2012. There have been discussions on the 190th Executive Board of UNESCO in 2012 on the nature of these five core functions.
- 6 *DFID's Results Framework*. Department for International Development. Level 1 outcomes are derived from the Millennium Development Goals, Level 2 are programme results, Level 3 is operational effectiveness and Level 4 is organisational effectiveness.
- 7 MAR 'What good looks like'.
- 8 *DFID Multilateral Aid Review: Taking Forward the Findings of the UK Multilateral Aid Review*. March 2011.
- 9 While UNESCO uses the term 'social and human sciences' this is often shortened to 'social sciences' for reasons of space and clarity of expression.
- 10 AcSS: Making the Case for the Social Sciences, No. 1, Wellbeing, [www.acss.org.uk/docs/Making%20the%20Case/wellbeing\\_brochure\\_view.pdf](http://www.acss.org.uk/docs/Making%20the%20Case/wellbeing_brochure_view.pdf)
- 11 AcSS: Making the Case for the Social Sciences, No. 2, Ageing, [www.acss.org.uk/docs/Making%20the%20Case/ACSS%20Making%20the%20Case%20Ageing.pdf](http://www.acss.org.uk/docs/Making%20the%20Case/ACSS%20Making%20the%20Case%20Ageing.pdf)
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- 15 AcSS: Making the Case for the Social Sciences, No. 6, Management, [www.acss.org.uk/docs/Making%20the%20Case/AcSS\\_Management\\_VIEW.pdf](http://www.acss.org.uk/docs/Making%20the%20Case/AcSS_Management_VIEW.pdf)
- 16 The quotes from DIFID, British Academy and the International Social Science Council are from their websites. The other quotes were offered in response to a request for comments on this Policy Brief.
- 17 DFID 'Research and evidence' [www.dfid.gov.uk/What-we-do/Research-and-evidence/](http://www.dfid.gov.uk/What-we-do/Research-and-evidence/)
- 18 British Academy: [www.britac.ac.uk/policy/research\\_and\\_he\\_policy.cfm](http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/research_and_he_policy.cfm) The British Academy contributed to the 2012 inquiry by the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology into DFID's activities to build scientific capacity: see their written contribution submitted in December 2011.
- 19 Quote from page 2, International Social Science Council (2010) *World Social Science Report: Knowledge Divides*.
- 20 ISSC (2010) *World Social Science Report: Knowledge Divides* was launched in the UK at the British Academy.

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