An evaluation of the World Social Science Report: Challenges and potential

August 2015

Policy Brief

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

United Kingdom
National Commission for UNESCO

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In preparation for this policy brief, the UK National Commission for UNESCO (UKNC) spoke to individuals at the Academy of Social Sciences, the UK Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research. In addition, the UKNC spoke with individuals involved with producing the 2013 World Social Science Report (WSSR) and those engaged in preparations for the next WSSR.

The interviews explored whether there is an appetite for the WSSR among its target audience and if so, how useful it is in its current form and how future reports can be improved.

Interviewees were asked to review the 2013 Report to inform their appraisal of the Report series in general. Interviewees' feedback on the 2013 Report is used to develop a series of recommendations on how future Reports can be improved.

1 / Executive summary

The World Social Science Report has the potential to position UNESCO as a champion of the Social Sciences in policy making. The Report could help to set the agenda and standards among social science communities and place world class social science in front of policy makers.

The UK National Commission for UNESCO's research among UK-based social scientists and policy makers (the audiences that the Report is targeted at) suggests that there is a real appetite for a World Social Science Report that connects the academic and policy worlds and synthesises existing, high quality social science research, applying it to the big issues of the day.

However, the Report's questionable focus, quality, presentation and dissemination suggest that the Report is not fulfilling its potential in its current form.

The World Social Science Report connects strongly with UNESCO's priorities in the social and human sciences. However, the Report must revisit its objectives to ensure that it has maximum impact, high quality research and a timely, relevant subject matter. In order to help realise the potential of the World Social Science Report, this brief recommends a new approach to the World Social Science Report series:

1. The Report should be seen explicitly as a means of bridging the academic and policy world. Its key role should be to bring world class social science to the attention of the wider world. This is a role UNESCO should be well positioned to deliver on given its unique brand identity and convening power.

2. The WSSR has value in synthesising world leading social science research on a topical issue, but it needs strong editorial control to ensure coherence and focus.

3. An approach which synthesises world leading research should include coverage of research conducted worldwide in order to be genuinely global.

4. The WSSR should be the landmark document that UNESCO uses to pursue its strategic objectives in the social and human sciences where it brings world class social science academic research to policy makers.

5. Rather than commissioning new research, the WSSR should identify and synthesise the most important existing social science research. It should then be targeted at clearly defined users primarily at the global level but with national resonance.

6. UNESCO Social and Human Sciences (SHS) should continue to view the WSSR as a key means of promoting and raising awareness of research in the social sciences and how it can be applied to policy. The WSSR should be seen as the mechanism whereby UNESCO SHS can act as a global forum for social science and, where appropriate, identifying gaps in social science. In this way UNESCO may set the agenda for social sciences globally.

7. Future Reports should consist of fewer but scientifically weightier chapters and that the refereeing process is of a standard associated with leading international journals.

8. For each Report an Editor should be appointed following an open process of recruitment. The Editor should be a leading authority in the relevant field, able to provide intellectual leadership and to galvanise the profession.

9. Each report should have an impact strategy that is tailored to target audiences. Greater use should be made of modern communications techniques, including social media, webinars and blogs. An official, public launch should be used to validate the Report's significance and generate interest. Momentum should be built by more regular Reports and consideration paid to timing. UNESCO should compare best practice and synergies regarding how it produces and launches reports, including in other sectors, such as its Education for All Global Monitoring Report and the UNESCO Science Report.

10. Greater engagement with the social science community is recommended for the Report's dissemination. There should be smart consultation with key agents throughout the Report's lifecycle, and these agents can then promote the Report on its release.

11. The dissemination plan should be accompanied with a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan so that lessons can be learned through an impact assessment process.

12. If UNESCO SHS is to continue to support the WSSR, then this brief recommends that more cost-effective solutions are sought as a matter of urgency.

2 / Introduction

The World Social Science Report (WSSR) strongly aligns with UNESCO's priorities. It has the potential to be the Organisation's flagship output in the social sciences and to connect the social and natural sciences with policy decision making. It could allow UNESCO to position itself as a standard setter and clearing house for world class social science research and as a global leader in coordinating and disseminating the social science community's research.

This brief draws upon feedback from interviews with UK-based policy makers and opinion formers to argue that the Report is not having the impact that it *could* and *should* have among its target audience. This is due to weaknesses in the focus, presentation and dissemination of the report and UNESCO's decision to reduce its role in the publication.

The information from these interviews has provided valuable insights used throughout this policy brief. The UKNC thanks all of those who took the time to speak to us and take responsibility for fact and interpretation.

3 / Background

The first WSSR was produced by UNESCO's Social and Human Sciences (SHS) Division in 1999 and was intended to be a biennial Report.[1] This initiative was not followed up until a decade later, when SHS approached the International Social Science Council (ISSC) to 'resurrect'[2] the Report. The ISSC took the project lead and full editorial control, with financial and editorial support from UNESCO. This second Report was published in 2010 and presented an overview of the social sciences in the different areas of the world.[3]

The third Report was published in 2013 and focused on a specific issue area - Changing Global Environments.[4] Despite UNESCO's reduced financial contribution (c.20% of the costs, excluding staff time), there was an 'intensive process of joint work'[5] between UNESCO and the ISSC in its production, with UNESCO especially involved in the more politically sensitive issues surrounding the Report.

The third Report was published both in hard copy and online, hosted initially by the OECD website. It consisted of a 28 page Executive Summary and a separate edited volume of contributions (hereafter referred to as 'the Main Report'). This latter, 612 page document consisted of 108 chapters and an extensive bibliometric analysis of work done in the social sciences on environmental change. The publication was followed by a number of presentations (including one in London).

1   UNESCO (1999), *World Social Science Report 1999*. UNESCO/Elsevier, Paris. Available at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001163/116325e.pdf, last accessed 10 February 2015.
2   Interview with ISSC, 12 November 2014.
3   ISSC/UNESCO (2010), *World Social Science Report 2010: Knowledge Divides.* UNESCO Publishing, Paris. Available at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001883/188333e.pdf, last accessed 15 February 2015.
4   ISSC/UNESCO (2013), *World Social Science Report 2013: Changing Global Environments* (hereafter *2013 Main Report*). OECD Publishing and UNESCO Publishing, Paris. Main Report available at: http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/social-issues-migration-health/world-social-science-report-2013_9789264203419-en#page1, last accessed 15 February 2015. Also *World Social Science Report 2013: Changing Global Environments Summary* (hereafter *2013 Summary*). OECD Publishing and UNESCO Publishing, Paris. Summary available at: http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002233/223388e.pdf, last accessed 15 February 2015.
5   Interview with UNESCO SHS, 24 November 2014.

Preparatory work is currently underway for the fourth Report, which will focus on the topic of inequality and social justice. As this is already a well-established area of social science inquiry, the role of the Report will be to identify new knowledge and future agendas. It will probably take the form of a survey rather than commissioning papers and is likely to be considerably shorter than its predecessor's 612 pages.

UNESCO explained that if it were to fund future WSSRs, the Report would have to align with its strategic objectives in the social sciences.

> **Recommendation: The UKNC believes that the Report connects strongly with UNESCO's priorities in the social and human sciences and recommends that UNESCO SHS retains its involvement with the WSSR, helping it to achieve its potential. However, the Report must revisit its objectives to ensure that it has maximum impact, high quality research and a timely, relevant subject matter. The UKNC is concerned that the initiative has passed almost entirely to the ISSC.**

4 / Evaluation

4.1 Role of the World Social Science Report

All UK-based experts consulted for this policy brief felt there was value in both the idea of a WSSR and in the 2013 Report itself. They agree the WSSR is potentially of significant value, both for UNESCO SHS and social science and policy making communities more widely.

The 2013 WSSR identifies five main objectives (see Box below).[6] Although these are to some extent specific to the 2013 WSSR, they do offer a useful way into discussing not only the success of the 2013 Report but the role of the WSSR more generally.

	Objective
1	To develop a social science framing of global environmental change and sustainability
2	To showcase some unique contributions that the social sciences can make, taking different disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives into account, and writing from or about different regions of the world
3	To explore and assess how well social science knowledge about changing global environments is linked to policy and action
4	To influence research programming, science policy making and funding, at national, regional and international levels
5	To mobilise the wider social science community to engage more effectively, and take the lead in developing a more integrated and transformative science of global change and sustainability

There is no explicit objective to inform or influence policy, which, the UKNC and UNESCO Secretariat believe, should be the Report's primary role.

6   2013 *Summary*, p.4.

Interviewees acknowledge the current disconnect between Report content and policy impact. The ISSC noted that that it is difficult to have an impact on a policy area as politically sensitive as environmental change.[7] A member of the Report's Scientific Advisory Committee[8] explained that it can be difficult to encourage authors to tailor their research to a policy audience and make direct conclusions that would be valid across the world.[9]

However, UNESCO SHS explained that agenda setting for the policy community is a core objective of the Report. This was also a view shared by the member of the Report's Scientific Advisory Committee who felt the Committee had been given a very clear sense that the Report was intended to put social science 'on the map' for environmental change and bring this to the attention of policy makers. This reflects uncertainty at the heart of the 2013 Report over its purpose - is it intended to be a research or an advocacy tool?

> **Recommendation: This brief recommends that the Report be seen explicitly as a means of bridging the academic and policy world. Its key role should be to bring world class social science to the attention of the wider world. This is a role UNESCO should be well positioned to deliver on given its unique brand identity and convening power.**

Interviewees were not convinced that the 2013 Report achieves the five main objectives identified in the table above.

Objective 1: To develop a social science framing of global environmental change and sustainability

Interviewees say that, in attempting to frame social science research within the context of environmental change, the 2013 Report has certain value. In particular, it chimes with a growing awareness that the natural sciences must incorporate insights from the social sciences to better understand and respond to environmental change. The Report is also considered useful in identifying

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7   Interview with ISSC, 12 November 2014.
8   The Scientific Advisory Committee consisted of 20 leading social scientists appointed to advise the editorial team on the focus and content of the 2013 Report.
9   Interview with member of the 2013 WSSR Scientific Advisory Committee, 16 January 2015.

the scope of environmental change research that has already been undertaken in the social sciences. Its global focus reveals how similar problems may be confronted in different settings. These positives all suggest the utility of an authoritative synthesis of world leading research and the role UNESCO might play in bringing together, championing and disseminating this social science research.

However, the 2013 Report has been criticised for allegedly speaking to social scientists rather than bringing together the social and natural science communities to produce a more holistic understanding of the issue. Commentators also say that the Report is not critically self-reflective, with a number of assumptions concerning environmental change going unchallenged (e.g. that environmental change is anthropogenic). The Main Report would benefit from greater rigour and focus to deliver a coherent framing of the issue, appearing to be more a collection of unrelated essays, often lacking in common themes or structure.

The Executive Summary has been criticised for being too general and broad with no key 'take away' messages or actions for the reader.

A further barrier to the Report realising its objective developing a 'social science framing of global environmental change' is its low profile among target audiences.

> **Recommendation: The WSSR has value in synthesising world leading social science research on a topical issue, but it needs strong editorial control to ensure coherence and focus.**

> **Objective 2: To showcase some unique contributions that the social sciences can make, taking different disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives into account and writing from or about different regions of the world**

The ISSC and UNESCO SHS saw the 2013 Report as an opportunity to broaden the dialogue on environmental change by including groups whose work

might not be traditionally highlighted. UNESCO SHS also saw the Report as an opportunity to provide global deliverables in the face of a tendency towards fragmentation in the social sciences. The ISSC had a regional focus, wanting the role to identify the issues that need to be supported with research in different regions, written by authors from that region. The breadth and the international focus of the 2013 Report should be noted, however the manner in which this was accomplished contributed to an overlong Report, which needed a more cohesive focus. Although this brief acknowledges that genuinely worldwide contributions add substantially to the global credibility of the Report, this should be explicitly incorporated into a new approach, which synthesises existing research.

> **Recommendation: This brief recommends that an approach which synthesises world leading research should include coverage of research conducted worldwide in order to be genuinely global.**

Objective 3: To explore and assess how well social science knowledge about changing global environments is linked to policy and action

This reflective approach to the link with policy is a missed opportunity for UNESCO to be more proactive in and for the social sciences. For UNESCO SHS in particular, the WSSR should represent its major opportunity to play a leading role in the social sciences, using its social capital to act as a bridge between the academic and policy worlds. This brief argues that SHS does not have the financial capacity to generate new knowledge in the social sciences on a regular basis, but it *can* identify and present current knowledge to new audiences. This would allow UNESCO SHS to position itself as a global forum where important issues in the social sciences may be discussed and conclusions presented to a wider audience. UNESCO SHS is uniquely positioned to act in this capacity, and not to do so would be a missed opportunity for the Organisation and raises questions over what its role is for the social sciences.

Recommendation: This brief recommends that the WSSR should be the landmark document that UNESCO uses to pursue its strategic objectives in the social and human sciences where it synthesises existing world class social scientific research and brings it to policy makers.

Objective 4: To influence research programming, science policy making and funding, at national, regional and international levels

The objectives of the 2013 Report reveal uncertainty over whether it is a work of *synthesis of current research* (implied in this objective) or presenting *new research* (objectives 1 and 2). This uncertainty is reflected in the papers in the Main Report and also in the target audience, which according to the ISSC includes both researchers and funding bodies. The authors of this report did not see any evidence of more targeted approaches to different types of funders, either regional or functional (e.g. charitable foundations, national research councils, international funding bodies). The ISSC also identified civil society and organisations addressing global issues as target audiences. Again there is an all-encompassing feel to these objectives which risks losing focus and traction. Although both the ISSC and UNESCO SHS appear to see the WSSR as a means of influencing funding bodies, thereby setting the agenda for social sciences, there is little evidence of success in this aim.

Recommendation: This brief recommends that, rather than commissioning new research, the WSSR should identify and synthesise the most important existing social science research. It should then be targeted at clearly defined users primarily at the global level but with national resonance.

Objective 5: To mobilise the wider social science community to engage more effectively, and take the lead in developing a more integrated and transformative science of global change and sustainability

UNESCO SHS sees the WSSR as an opportunity to set the agenda for the social sciences but there is insufficient evidence for this in the Report's current form. While the 2013 Report identified an area where the social sciences had not been effectively mobilised, this will not always be the case. Indeed the topic of the next report, inequality and social justice, has already been well covered by the social sciences. It is not clear that it is always appropriate or practical for UNESCO to set research agendas in the social sciences, not least because research requires funding. Nevertheless UNESCO can use the WSSR to highlight deficiencies and gaps in social science research, as it did in the 2013 Report.

> **Recommendation: This brief recommends that UNESCO SHS continue to view the WSSR as a key means of promoting and raising awareness of research in the social sciences and how it can be applied to policy. The WSSR should be seen as the mechanism whereby UNESCO SHS can act as a global forum for the social sciences and, where appropriate, identifying gaps in social science. In this way UNESCO may set the agenda for social sciences globally.**

4.2   Quality assurance

The UKNC believes that the Report's current quality assurance process could be improved.

The 2013 Report began with an open call for papers. Around 200 were submitted. Further papers were commissioned on the advice of the Report's Scientific Advisory Committee. All papers were refereed at least once and the entire Report was sent to three external referees. While this process appears to be robust, concerns were raised by interviewees over both the quality of the refereeing process and the selection criteria for the Committee.

Despite a significant number of papers being rejected through the refereeing process, the resulting chapters remain of mixed quality. One member of the Report's Scientific Advisory Committee suggested that they were not of the standard associated with an internationally recognised journal; a view with which this brief concurs. UNESCO SHS told the UKNC of the difficulties

in persuading some of the leading social scientists working in the field of environmental change to contribute to the 2013 Report, suggesting a lack of traction. When these leading figures did contribute, it is not always clear that they submitted their best work. As a result, the 2013 Report is arguably not of the highest scientific quality throughout. Moreover, users referred to the lack of critical self-reflection in the Report, questioned some of its content and were critical of a series of unquestioned assumptions concerning environmental change.

> **Recommendation: This brief recommends that future Reports consist of fewer but scientifically weightier chapters and that the refereeing process is of a standard associated with leading international journals.**

Appointing the Scientific Advisory Committee

The Scientific Advisory Committee for the 2013 Report consisted of 20 individuals, many of whom are immediately recognisable as leading social scientists but are not necessarily leading in the field of environmental change. This raises questions over whether the Committee, distinguished though it was, consisted of the most appropriate individuals to advise on the Report's quality and focus.

> **Recommendation: For each Report an Editor should be appointed following an open process of recruitment. The Editor should be a leading authority in the relevant field, able to provide intellectual leadership and to galvanise the profession.**

Making an impact

The UKNC believes that, given the appetite for the *idea* of a World Social Science Report, the Report would make a bigger impact with a more targeted dissemination approach.

A summary of the 2013 dissemination plan:

The 2013 Main Report and Executive Summary were published in English, French and Spanish and freely available as hard copy and online. The decision

to use the OECD website to host the Report was informed by experience from the 2010 Report, where the UNESCO website was insufficiently agile to respond to the Report's publication. Although the third Report was eventually made available on the UNESCO website, this practice does suggest inadequacies in UNESCO's ability to disseminate important findings promptly online.

A number of launch events (an estimated 15) were held for the 2013 Report, mainly in those states which had contributed financially to the Report. Although this appears an appropriate gesture to demonstrate a return on investment, it does not indicate a well thought through approach to making an impact nor does it sufficiently address UNESCO's two Global Priorities of Gender Equality and Priority Africa.

Respondents noted that one of the advantages of such a large pool of authors was that they could individually advertise the Report's findings at conferences they attended, though the authors of this brief are not aware of either UNESCO SHS or ISSC assisting in this.

The central challenge to this dissemination approach is that it is not sufficiently strategic or targeted. From our review of the Report and our interviews with representatives of its intended audience, the UKNC has made the following observations:

- **It is not clear who the target audience(s) are** and how the dissemination approach was tailored to those audiences. Dissemination approaches should be tailored to different audiences to maximise impact.

- **It is not clear whether there was a press launch** or any other major event to publicise the Report on publication. The dissemination of Executive Summaries was therefore, in effect, 'cold calling' and the Report would only be picked up by recipients if it was perceived as immediately useful. Given the crowded marketplace for ideas, it is difficult to see how this approach would be successful. This perspective is supported the views of those interviewed in the preparation of this brief.

> **Recommendation: To maximise impact, it would be more effective to release the WSSR in the period building up to a major international event and the topic may be chosen with that event in mind.**

- **It is unclear how or why recipients of the Executive Summary had been chosen**, or why there was no short 'flyer' advertising the Report and electronically disseminated cheaply, across a much wider constituency, with numerous re-mailings.

- Moreover, the intermittent publication of the WSSR (every three years) means that **no momentum is built up**.

At 28 pages, the Executive Summary is a substantial report in its own right and is likely to be **too long for many audiences**. At 612 pages, the Main Report is arguably far too long to be of use in any sense other than 'dipping in' to find a particular topic of interest.

- **The online strategy of simply publishing on the website is dated** – there were no supporting webinars, blogs or tweets. There is no presence on YouTube or any attempt to make this a living document which can be added to or discussed online.

> **Recommendation: This brief recommends that each Report develops an impact strategy that is tailored to target audiences. Greater use should be made of modern communications techniques, including social media, webinars and blogs. An official, public launch should be used to validate the Report's significance and generate interest which communicating a single, clear message. Momentum should be built by more regular Reports and consideration paid to timing. UNESCO should compare best practice and synergies regarding how it produces and launches reports, including in other sectors, such as its Education for All Global Monitoring Report and UNESCO Science Report[10].**

10 GMR: https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/#sthash.MPHm1ssX.dpbs; Science Report: http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/science-technology/prospective-studies/unesco-science-report/

Mobilising the social science community

The WSSR team is encouraged to engage more proactively with the social science community in disseminating the Report. Contributors to the Report do not appear to have been systematically engaged as potential champions for dissemination.

> **Recommendation: This brief recommends greater engagement with the social science community in the Report's dissemination. There should be smart consultation with key agents throughout the Report's lifecycle, and these agents can then promote the Report on its release.**

Measuring impact

The authors of this report are not aware of any attempt to measure the impact of the Report or to monitor and evaluate the efficacy of the dissemination strategy.

> **Recommendation: This report recommends that the dissemination plan is accompanied with a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan so that lessons can be learned through an impact assessment process.**

Value for money

The cost of the Report was in excess of US$1 million, excluding staff time, which was a reduction from the 2010 Report. The ISSC editorial team consisted of eight people, one of whom was part time, while the Scientific Advisory Committee was 20-strong. This is a very large editorial team and advisory committee for a single publication, which, it is presumed, contributed significantly to the overall cost of the 2013 Report. UNESCO contributed US$250,000 to the ISSC and a further c.US$20,000 towards the publication costs. It also covered the costs of translation into French and Spanish (c.US$80,000). Our view is that overall this is a very large expenditure for such a volume.

> **Recommendation: If UNESCO SHS is to continue to support the WSSR, then this brief recommends that more cost-effective solutions are sought as a matter of urgency.**

5 / Recommendations

UNESCO SHS should retain its involvement with the WSSR as it connects strongly with UNESCO's priorities in the social and human sciences. However, in order to help realise the World Social Science Report's huge potential, the UKNC provides the following recommendations intended to inspire a new approach to the World Social Science Report series.

1. The Report should be seen explicitly as a means of bridging the academic and policy world. Its key role should be to bring world class social science to the attention of the wider world. This is a role UNESCO should be well positioned to deliver on given its unique brand identity and convening power.

2. The WSSR has value in synthesising world leading social science research on a topical issue, but it needs strong editorial control to ensure coherence and focus.

3. An approach which synthesises world leading research should include coverage of research conducted worldwide in order to be genuinely global.

4. The WSSR should be the landmark document that UNESCO uses to pursue its strategic objectives in the social and human sciences where it brings world class social science academic research to policy makers.

5. Rather than commissioning new research, the WSSR should identify and synthesise the most important existing social science research. It should then be targeted at clearly defined users primarily at the global level but with national resonance.

6. UNESCO Social and Human Sciences (SHS) should continue to view the WSSR as a key means of promoting and raising awareness of research in the social sciences and how it can be applied to policy. The WSSR should be

seen as the mechanism whereby UNESCO SHS can act as a global forum for the social science and, where appropriate, identifying gaps in social science. In this way UNESCO may set the agenda for social sciences globally.

7. Future Reports should consist of fewer but scientifically weightier chapters and that the refereeing process is of a standard associated with leading international journals.

8. For each Report an Editor should be appointed following an open process of recruitment. The Editor should be a leading authority in the relevant field, able to provide intellectual leadership and to galvanise the profession.

9. Each report should have an impact strategy that is tailored to target audiences. Greater use should be made of modern communications techniques, including social media, webinars and blogs. An official, public launch should be used to validate the Report's significance and generate interest. Momentum should be built by more regular Reports and consideration paid to timing. UNESCO should compare best practice and synergies regarding how it produces and launches reports, including in other sectors, such as its Education for All Global Monitoring Report and the UNESCO Science Report.

10. Greater engagement with the social science community is recommended for the Report's dissemination. There should be smart consultation with key agents throughout the Report's lifecycle, and these agents can then promote the Report on its release.

11. The dissemination plan should be accompanied with a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Plan so that lessons can be learned through an impact assessment process.

12. If UNESCO SHS is to continue to support the WSSR, then this brief recommends that more cost-effective solutions are sought as a matter of urgency.

6 / Acknowledgments

The lead author of the report was Professor Colin McInnes, Social and Human Sciences Director for the UK National Commission for UNESCO with support from its Communication and Information Director, Karen Merkel. The staff lead was Sophie Leedham.

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