



# Chapter 10

## Conclusions and future lines of action



Adult and child learning to read  
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# Conclusions and future lines of action

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With global challenges and change affecting all human societies, social science knowledge is more crucial than ever. The contribution of the natural sciences to the struggle against these global challenges is indisputable. Yet this Report illustrates many ways in which the methodological, analytical and critical resources of the social sciences also grant them a key role, far greater than many might believe. In a wide variety of ways, the social sciences teach us that 'global' is not the same as 'uniform'. The same challenge or social trend will be seen differently in various societies, and this means that responses to change need to be adapted to context.

Climate change is a case in point. The struggle against its effects, and for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, supposes a thorough knowledge of local contexts, and broad understandings that jointly articulate global and local contexts. Social sciences are crucial to identifying the problems that underlie, result from and aggravate such change, and they then provide the basis for developing sustainable solutions to such problems. Another example is poverty. Fighting against poverty requires global mobilization and worldwide studies. However, meaningful solutions require an understanding of how the poor apprehend their situation, what they most suffer from, and how to mobilize them best. We are in a period in which local studies and global theorization are both needed.

But there is more to the significance of social sciences in today's world than the acknowledgement that 'context matters', an axiom that no one will contest in theory, even if they do so in practice. Under favourable conditions, social sciences accompany the evolution of human societies. They are shaped by the transformations in societies and at the same time invite societies to reflect and act upon themselves. Are social sciences in a position to fulfil these functions at the beginning of the twenty-first century? Or do the divides in their organization impede them? The report maps out the condition of social sciences throughout

the world and considers the impact of various factors on social science knowledge production and use.

The report points towards positive achievements worldwide in the ten years since the last *World Social Science Report*. These include: the enormous increase in the number of graduate and postgraduate students in social sciences, which has increased faster than the overall increase in university enrolments; the multiplication of publications; the increased demand for social science knowledge and skills; and the growing influence of social science concepts and theories in public debates, and their greater dissemination in scientific communities and societies. This has been made possible by advances in information technology, and has occurred in spite of sometimes limited access to specialized reviews and websites. Beside these positive achievements, the Report portrays a number of inequalities and asymmetries. It identifies eight divides:

- a geographical divide
- a capacity divide
- the unequal degree of internationalization of knowledge production
- the divide between disciplines
- the divide between mainstream research and alternative approaches
- the competition resulting from new managerial practices
- the sometimes tense relations between academics and society and between academics and policy-makers.

To varying degrees, these divides undermine the capacity of social sciences to contribute answers to global challenges and to analyse trends affecting human societies. A series of conclusions can be derived from the various contributions to this volume, and in general terms they can be grouped under two main headings: the persistent disparities in research capacities, and knowledge fragmentation.

# Persistent disparities in research capacities

In spite of very positive achievements, a number of striking inequalities persist across regions and within countries. While the number of researchers, students, graduates, including Ph.D. graduates, and publications has increased everywhere over the past decade, the internationalization of knowledge has strengthened the existing big institutional players: North American and European journals, bibliographical databases, universities and research centres.

During this period, some countries have significantly improved their research capacity and have emerged as important centres of knowledge production. European, including east European, social sciences have improved their presence in international networks and publications. Brazil and China have significantly expanded their numbers of social scientists and of publications in international journals. These examples suggest that comprehensive and well-funded long-term policy by governments, regional organizations and associations can be decisive in the reinforcement of social science capacities. In Brazil and China, such comprehensive policies have included improvements in research infrastructure and local education facilities, the development of postgraduate programmes in first-grade universities, exchange programmes for students and professors, scholarships, and subsidies for publication and translation.

The biggest inequalities in social science performance largely result from differences in funding for higher education generally and for research in particular. There is enormous inequality between the well-funded institutions of the global North and the highly underfunded ones of the global South. In some emerging countries, major commitments to higher education and social science research are bringing rapid advancement. At the other extreme, already difficult situations in developing countries have been worsened by political instability and conflicts. Examples of such countries can be found in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In between these extremes several countries and knowledge institutions in the global South have supported training over research, and quantity over quality in social sciences.

The relative and sometimes absolute decline in public support for social science research is not limited to

developing countries. It is not a new phenomenon either: it started in the 1980s, but the trend was certainly not reversed in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Instead, a number of policies and management tools were gradually put in place which were intended to compensate for this relative decline. These policies resulted in the marketization of research, the multiplication of research centres and consultancy firms outside universities, increased competition for funding, greater attention to the international ranking of institutions, and evaluations being increasingly based on quantitative indicators. The impact of these new developments on capacity is mixed, depending on the context and the strengths of the research institutions involved.

In developing countries, the marketization of research has resulted predominantly in the multiplication of non-state actors outside universities, especially consultancy firms and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) funded by international agencies. To an extent, this has allowed some research to take place where public funding is no longer available, thus giving social science research some visibility and credibility. But the explosion of consultant-led research has influenced the type and nature of the research conducted. It has given undue prominence to certain themes, easily funded by aid agencies, and has led to an overemphasis on data collection, empirical studies and expertise-oriented work at the expense of more theorized research. Furthermore, the quality of such research is far from guaranteed, since consultancy firms and NGOs work under strong time pressure and often shift quickly from one theme to another. Consultant-led research has also contributed to the internal brain drain. Private and semi-private agencies and organizations offer researchers far better working conditions than universities can. This form of research can also lead to the creation of a large pool of temporary researchers waiting for a full-time position. In this sense, the marketization of research has been detrimental to academic social science research but also to institutional capacity.

In developed countries, the marketization of research takes somewhat similar forms, but its effects are far less harmful to academe and to research. The emergence of NGOs, consultancy firms and think-tanks has encouraged the development of a more responsive and engaged

community, oriented towards today's problems. But it can unduly politicize the production of knowledge and encourage partisanship. This raises the question of the quality control of the research produced. Another concern is for the number of 'invisible' researchers: that is, those in unstable and uncertain professional situations.

### Project funding

The relative increase in project funding and the decrease in core funding are not unrelated to the marketization of research, and can exert similar pressures. At a general level, project funding was meant to stimulate researchers to increase the quantity of their output and to promote excellence. It was also meant to encourage interdisciplinary and policy-relevant studies. In many cases this succeeded, but a deeper comparative analysis of the impact of project funding remains to be done. Project funding can be detrimental to academic research if short-term projects are overly privileged, if researchers are overburdened with administrative tasks, if only a handful of funding agencies are active in a region or country, or if only restricted research agendas are supported. These potential threats are present in all regions and countries. But they are more damaging in regions with limited – or no – deep-rooted capacity in social sciences. The degree to which funding agencies – national or international, public, private, semi-private or NGOs – have become prescriptive and influence research agendas also varies across regions and between countries.

### Quantitative evaluation methods, bibliometrics and ranking

Project funding leads to greater competition for funds and often to quantitative evaluation of outputs. Many social science research systems now include mechanisms to evaluate outputs and assess the impact of programmes, research projects and individual academics. This tendency is strong in developed countries, where management-like practices of yearly reports and accountability have become the routine of many academics, and where mechanisms to ensure quality have been institutionalized. Nevertheless, it is no less predominant in regions where a large share of the research output is funded by aid agencies and NGOs. Brazil, China, Mexico, South Africa, Venezuela and other countries implement similar evaluation mechanisms. Often the notion of 'excellence' is a watchword for competitive systems. But striving for continuous quality improvement may be a more effective and realistic strategy, even in countries with strong research capacities.

Two other phenomena have become prominent in academic life in recent years: bibliometrics and rankings. These tools increase competition between institutions.



Rebuilding National Office of Ethnology, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, after January 2010 earthquake  
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Bibliometrics is largely used in the evaluation of institutions, programmes and sometimes, in combination with peer review, researchers themselves. However, its use in the evaluation of social science research has serious limitations. The main instruments of bibliometrics, databases and citation indexes, focus on a relatively small number of international journals and do not adequately mirror social research landscapes, particularly in countries outside the global North.

The national and international ranking of institutions has mobilized attention and raised much concern among researchers, heads of universities and policy-makers in the global North, but also in emerging countries. Most rankings have strong biases that are detrimental to social sciences. Their impact on capacity is not well known, although it is likely that the best students try to enrol in top-ranked institutions, and lecturers and researchers do their best to join them. Ranking and bibliometrics reinforce existing hierarchies and favour the concentration of funds in the best-ranked institutions, possibly limiting variety in social science research themes.

Despite the numerous debates and discussions on their methods and value, bibliometrics and international rankings surpass any alternatives as means of comparison and benchmarking in academic competition. Whatever criticism they face, they are likely to endure and influence the university landscape. Nonetheless, they do require improvements. The evaluation of research systems, institutions and researchers needs to combine bibliometrics with qualitative criteria such as peer evaluation. Furthermore, the number of national and international databases and indexes should increase, thus encompassing a greater share of the world's social science production. The number of university and department rankings also needs to increase to include different measures of success and strength, thus better mirroring quality in social science research and teaching. The model that is used in some countries, in which various university rankings are produced based on a wide variety of indicators, seems to do better justice to the various functions of a university.

## Brain drain and professional migration

Professional migration is another major trend affecting research capacities everywhere, albeit in different ways. In regions and countries with very weak social science capacities, academic brain drain endangers research as well as teaching. Africa is particularly at risk, but is not unique in this regard. The migration of social scientists often starts with the migration of students who study abroad and who, at the end of their studies, join a research team in the country where they studied. Various countries have put incentives in place to persuade graduates to come back after graduating from a foreign university. But the efficiency of these measures is moderate, and promises to remain so unless working conditions improve significantly in the sending countries. Regions and countries with better social science capacity also suffer from the brain drain. But they have more scope to counter its effects with programmes dedicated to attracting qualified academics from other countries, so that they can benefit from increased diversity in their recruitment.

Still, mobility is not all one way. New poles of attraction have developed, researchers circulate, and after years spent abroad, students and professional social scientists may return to their country of origin. When this happens, brain circulation is beneficial for the sending regions and countries. It offers opportunities to confront ideas and transfer new concepts, and helps integrate local scholars into the networks of a worldwide knowledge system.

Most of the trends mentioned above increase the capacity divide between regions and countries, undermining the ability of the social sciences to fulfil their role in society. The report highlights another set of divides touching on theoretical and epistemological issues and problems. Many of these issues and problems concern the meaning and limits of the internationalization of social science knowledge, and the extent to which it contributes to improving the quality and relevance of social sciences. Others concern the multiplication of disciplines and their presumed lack of collaboration, which undermine their ability to respond to today's problems.

# Knowledge fragmentation: one social science? Disciplines apart? Worlds apart?

In order to fulfil their functions in the face of global challenges and to keep analysing the trends affecting human societies, the social sciences need to become more international and more inter- and trans-disciplinary than they have been. Let us develop these two aspects.

## Internationalization of research

Internationalization changes the face of social science research. This involves redefining the scale on which research is carried out, and developing new ways of articulating local and global research. One obvious consequence is the increasing demand for global topics and outlooks. The production of 'global studies' on 'global issues' has grown over the past few years. In developing countries, social science research remains largely dominated by topics of local relevance that affect their immediate surroundings. This research is often written in local languages and disseminated in national books and journals. It is often invisible at international level and is insufficiently reflected in global studies. The internationalization of knowledge has confirmed the prevalence of the ideas and knowledge traditions of Northern countries over others, as well as that of English as the almost exclusive language of international research collaborations and dissemination. French, German and Spanish are still used to a lesser extent. Paradoxically, many universal or global studies are in fact very local, relying almost exclusively on the observation of one or a few similar societies, and quote works in only one or two languages. To improve their ability to address global and local issues, social sciences need to become genuinely international.

This criticism of the North Atlantic hegemony is a thread throughout the pages of this Report, and is a common feature of many fora on the issue. Challenges come from very different parts of the world, including the global North itself. They focus on the topics and language favoured in international peer-reviewed journals. Even when regional social science production meets the quality requirements of international research, it usually fails to influence international debates and discussions when it takes the form of local studies written in a language not widely spoken in international networks, or when it concerns countries and topics not well represented in bibliographical databases.

Contesting the hegemonies of topics and models in social science production is one thing, but providing actual alternatives is another. Alternative global theories and frameworks ought to be developed on the basis of broader comparative analyses which encompass more diverse regions than is usually done, and ought to be formulated in ways that allow generalizations. Greater institutionalization of mechanisms to ensure research quality would also contribute to making alternative research more visible.

Criticisms of the North Atlantic hegemony should eventually become more visible in the social science production of the global North, even though many of them originate from there. 'Global' studies might then become much more international than they are, paying more attention to the variety of local situations. Social scientists who want to study the functioning of foreign societies would be well advised to learn their languages, and to incorporate local traditions and the local production of social science knowledge in their analyses.

Another way of improving the quality of international social sciences is to favour collaboration through research networks and communities. They can help bridge the theoretical-epistemological divides, especially if more collaborations are developed between local networks in the 'peripheries' and in the North Atlantic 'centre'. 'Glocal' collaborations between different peripheries are another channel for overcoming the limitations of international social science.

Despite the potential of collaboration, past efforts have shown that networks have not always been strong enough to reverse the effects of unequal resources; nor has pluralistic thinking been strong enough to reverse existing hegemonies. Better communications do not necessarily mean more diversity of viewpoints.

## Inter- and trans-disciplinary research

There are divisions between national traditions of knowledge, and also between and within disciplines. These divides are essential for the renewal of knowledge and the creativity of social scientists.

One effect of the recent evolution of disciplinary boundaries is the multiplication of subdisciplines and hyperspecial-

ization. Some universities try to counterbalance these trends and their effect on the education of undergraduate students by setting up liberal arts colleges and professional schools. However, these play only a minor role in research, for which interdisciplinary centres have been developed. Social scientists and research institutions are already testing new forms of knowledge organization, often around specific topics, and are likely to continue doing so. The desire to facilitate communication between subfields has also led to the creation of new journals.

Social scientists from different disciplines are increasingly expected to work together on the same problems, especially when it comes to addressing global challenges. One of the difficulties to achieve this concerns the development and support of centres and institutes open to

cooperation between the social and natural sciences. There are however many obstacles to such collaboration. To start with, inter- and trans-disciplinary work often does not place all disciplines on an equal footing. Other obstacles relate to funding structures, systems of evaluation and promotion, methodological approaches, and pedagogical issues concerning interdisciplinary training. Many of these remain discipline-specific. Often the challenge is not merely for those in the different disciplines to work together, but more fundamentally for degree programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels to adopt multi-method approaches to research, training and knowledge-seeking. Unless countries and universities address these obstacles, inter- and trans-disciplinary collaborations are likely to remain wishful thinking.

## Knowledge gaps on the state of the social sciences worldwide

The report highlights an extended range of important issues and trends in the organization of social sciences worldwide. It brings together a wealth of new knowledge and data on areas not well covered in the international literature, thanks to the strong commitment of the authors to provide the latest and most reliable data available. But as a clearer picture of the state of the social sciences emerges, so do the limits of our knowledge. The authors repeatedly notice the scarcity and deficiencies of available data on social scientists and their activities. Most research in science studies does not adequately discuss aspects specific to the social sciences. The study in Annex 1 summarizes the state of accessible international data on social sciences, and emphasizes the incomparability of data on the number of researchers between countries and regions, and over time. This makes it difficult to show how fast social science teaching and research have progressed in the world in the past ten years. The annex again stresses how little social science knowledge the social sciences have about themselves. A stronger focus of science studies on the social sciences could be helpful in overcoming these gaps.

Several areas that have been covered in this Report require more research. Amongst the most important areas, the following need to be stressed:

- the major themes analysed by social sciences in different regions, and the extent of the internationalization of the research content;
- major changes affecting institutions on which social science depends, such as the growth of the for-profit sector in research, the expansion in the number of think-tanks and NGOs, and the transformation of institutions supporting scholarly communication;
- the extent of institutionalization of social science in public and private organizations, such as ministries of finance and advertising companies;
- the penetration of social science terminology, perspectives and theories in the media and public discourse;
- the extent and characteristics of social science teaching at secondary level and the role of the social science textbook industry in legitimizing and transmitting knowledge to new generations of students;
- the effects of language hegemonies, and ways of promoting linguistic diversity;
- the impact of digitization and large databases on the nature and type of research produced;

- the prerequisites for research networks to function well, assessing the success and failures of previous attempts to overcome divides.

Authors have used national statistics to describe the state of social sciences in their country or region, but these statistics are often not comparable between countries. Comparable data on the following would be useful to better portray international trends in the state and production of social sciences: the number of full-time social scientists and students in the different disciplines at the different levels; the kind of institutions at which they work; and the amount and source of their research funding. Present statistics suggest that most professional social scientists

work at universities and research institutes. However, the increasing number of trained social scientists working for agencies, organizations, NGOs, think-tanks and other non-academic research institutions is unknown.

Data on the international circulation of social scientists and ideas is grossly insufficient. On the whole, we know little of the circulation of scientists, and even less of the circulation of social scientists specifically. How many social scientists in the different disciplines are trained in foreign countries? Where do they work? What measures are taken to offer professional positions to those studying and working abroad? How do international networks impact the circulation of academic personnel and ideas?

## Directions for future action

The following suggestions for future action are addressed to international bodies such as the International Social Science Council (ISSC) and UNESCO, to funding agencies at national and international levels, to governments, and to major academic institutions that are concerned with overcoming knowledge divides. They are presented in general terms which should be made specific at the regional or national levels.

The development of research capacity requires that governments, international organizations and aid agencies provide funding to support research institutions as well as individual training. The three levels of capacity – individual, organizational and systemic – all need sustained attention. Funding has to be made available for a sufficient period to produce results. Long-term rather than immediate impact is the objective. To combat the negative aspects of brain drain, programmes enhancing the circulation of ideas and social scientists should be promoted, and should include support for diasporic networks.

There are great disparities between regions, countries and institutions in terms of access to knowledge. Governments, research councils, foundations and funding agencies should provide universities and research institutions with the technology and money needed to support equal access to the most important national and international journals in social sciences. Furthermore, governments and international organizations should negotiate with major publishing groups to accelerate and extend free and open

access to articles published in international peer-reviewed journals. Non-state actors, agencies, regional organizations and national governments could also increase their support for open-access, peer-reviewed journals. African Journals Online (AJOL), SCIELO, REDALYC and CLACSO in Latin America can serve as models for the development of similar and broader initiatives.

New technologies foster a variety of modes of collaboration between social scientists. Open-source technologies are likely to play a significant role in the development of research capacity in social sciences. Initiatives aiming at developing new digital tools for research, collaboration and networking in the social sciences will be of critical importance. It is suggested that governments, research councils and consortia of universities cooperate in developing open access archives for the deposit and dissemination of social science studies.

It is essential to reinforce multilingualism among social scientists, especially those in the global North. One goal is that everyone should be able to work and collaborate in their own language while understanding other languages. Translation, data treatment and circulation, and collaborative tools require specific development. International bodies and organizations may want to consider helping translation policies in social sciences. For example, studies addressing global challenges from a local perspective should be translated in order to widen the scope of public debate.

International associations, networks and communities are important for circulating ideas, disseminating knowledge and building capacity. Efforts should be made to strengthen existing structures and develop new ones. Regional and subregional networks can contribute very positively to the restructuring of the research landscape along regional lines, if they are supported by a variety of public national, international and private funding agencies. Different networks are required, with different purposes and memberships. Regional social science networks should work to transcend disciplinary, linguistic, gender, generational, regional and ideological divisions. South–South networks supported by private foundations and international organizations could go a long way to reduce disparities in the global academy.

Competitive project funding is likely to remain a dominant trend in the years to come. As shown in the Report, it has advantages. But it has disadvantages as well, such as the extreme bureaucratic procedures involved in selection and monitoring processes, and, in certain cases, the dominance of short-term funding. Selection and evaluation processes should be kept as simple as possible. In order to ensure diversity, some resources should be reserved for innovative projects which fall outside the list of priority topics identified by funding agencies. Governments should also be aware of the importance of balancing project funding with a strong basis of core funding. Social science research needs a baseline of stable funding. This allows institutions to attract and retain professors and researchers, to offer them an adequate research infrastructure, and to support innovative research.

Many of the challenges that the social sciences are asked to address require knowledge beyond the confines of

single disciplines, and at times encompass the domains of the natural sciences and humanities. It is important to encourage interdisciplinary research and to institutionalize it. It has been suggested that interdisciplinary research centres should be created to improve our understanding of the social aspects of major global challenges such as environmental change. Here researchers from different disciplines could cooperate, and researchers with more than one disciplinary background could be hired. Experimental programmes in which natural scientists are educated in the social sciences and social scientists in the natural sciences would be welcome.

International digital databases are essential tools for overcoming knowledge divides between different areas of the world, and for opening up the possibilities of international research programmes. International organizations and various funding agencies should support their development.

International bodies such as UNESCO, ISSC, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and regional organizations could usefully address the information gaps mentioned above. A working group should be set up to identify what is feasible in the relatively short term, and to identify other issues which should be dealt with at the national level.

The importance of social sciences in today's world is indisputable, yet their overall influence remains limited because of huge disparities in research capacities across countries and the fragmentation of knowledge. Much remains to be done, but on the global level the Report makes a number of suggestions on how to address these divides. ∩