

Foreword

I welcome the publication of the 2010 *World Social Science Report*, the first thorough overview of this important field in more than a decade. Edited by and co-published with the International Social Science Council (ISSC), it is the product of the active engagement of hundreds of professional social scientists who have contributed their expertise to make this publication a reference.

The Report reaffirms UNESCO's commitment to the social sciences, and our desire to set a new global agenda to promote them as an invaluable tool for the advancement of the internationally agreed development goals. UNESCO, with its emphasis on the management of social transformation, is concerned that the social sciences should be put to use to improve human well-being and to respond to global challenges. As long ago as 1974, UNESCO's General Conference adopted a Recommendation on the Status of Scientific Researchers which emphasized 'the need to apply science and technology in a great variety of specific fields of wider than national concern: namely such vast and complex problems as the preservation of international peace and the elimination of want'.

Today, the social sciences bring greater clarity to our understanding of how human populations interact with one another, and, by extension, with the environment. The ideas and information they generate can therefore make a precious contribution to the formulation of effective policies to shape our world for the greater good.

Yet, social scientific knowledge is at risk in the parts of the world where it is most needed. The huge disparities in research capacities across countries and the fragmentation of knowledge hamper the capacity of social sciences to respond to the challenges of today and tomorrow. While we may be building a 'knowledge society', it is one that looks very different depending on one's regional perspective. Social scientists produce work of outstanding quality and tremendous practical value, but, as this Report illustrates, social scientific knowledge is often the least developed in those parts of the world where it is most keenly needed – hence this publication's title, 'Knowledge Divides'.

Global divides reproduce themselves in each generation, in our institutions and in our methods of creating and using knowledge. Global divides affect all indicators of human development, hampering the accumulation, transmission and use of knowledge in our societies, to the detriment of equitable development. Consider the world's one billion poorest who live on less than US\$1.25 per day. There is a consensus that their lot should urgently be improved but why do well-intentioned policies so often produce so little? We may, perhaps, need better intentions; we certainly need better and more accessible knowledge that can provide policies with the evidence that they need to make a difference.

Social scientific endeavour is also poorer for its bias towards English and English-speaking developed countries. This is a missed opportunity to explore perspectives and paradigms that are embedded in other cultural and linguistic traditions. A more culturally and linguistically diverse approach by the social sciences would be of tremendous value to organizations such as UNESCO in our efforts to foster mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue.

All these findings are profoundly challenging – they emphasize that without conscious and coordinated effort, the drift of the global social science landscape is towards fragmentation, lack of pluralism and estrangement between scientific endeavour and social needs. Clearly, institutions matter hugely for research performance. But their strength can hardly be taken for granted in today's economic circumstances. The production of rigorous, relevant and pluralistic social science knowledge requires international coordination, a long-term vision and a stable environment.

I am confident that this Report will help to galvanize the energies of all of those who are concerned to see the social sciences flourish in the years to come.



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