

Make social sciences relevant

We need to turn the efforts of social scientists towards global challenges, argues **Luk Van Langenhove**.

The social sciences are flourishing. As of 2005, there were almost half a million professional social scientists from all fields in the world, working both inside and outside academia. According to the *World Social Science Report 2010* (ref. 1), the number of social-science students worldwide has swollen by about 11% every year since 2000, up to 22 million in 2006.

Yet this enormous resource is not contributing enough to today's global challenges, including climate change, security, sustainable development and health. These issues all have root causes in human behaviour: all require behavioural change and social innovations, as well as technological development. Stemming climate change, for example, is as much about changing consumption patterns and promoting tax acceptance as it is about developing clean energy. Humanity has the necessary agro-technological tools to eradicate hunger, from genetically engineered crops to artificial fertilizers. Here, too, the problems are social: the organization and distribution of food, wealth and prosperity. And Peter Piot, former head of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, has argued that the social sciences have great potential for helping policy-makers to combat that disease, by unravelling sexual and addictive behaviours, and more¹.

Despite these factors, many social scientists seem reluctant to tackle such issues. And in Europe, some are up in arms over a proposal to drop a specific funding category for social-science research and to integrate it within cross-cutting topics of sustainable development. This is a shame — the community should be grasping the opportunity to raise its influence in the real world. To paraphrase the great social scientist Joseph Schumpeter: there is no radical innovation without creative destruction.

Today, the social sciences are largely focused on disciplinary problems and internal scholarly debates, rather than on topics with external impact. Bibliometric analyses of the Thomson Reuters Social Sciences Citation Index reveal that the number of papers including the keywords 'environmental change' or 'climate change' have increased exponentially since 2004. However, the numbers are still small: in 2010, about 1,600 of the 100,000 social-sciences papers published globally (just 1.6%) included one of these keywords². A similar trend exists for work on global poverty: even though there was a 500% increase in publications on this

topic from 1999 to 2005 (ref. 1), this resulted in only 276 publications during this period.

When social scientists do tackle practical issues, their scope is often local: Belgium is interested mainly in the effects of poverty on Belgium, for example. And whether the community's work contributes much to an overall accumulation of knowledge is doubtful.



Global problems, such as access to clean water, need an integrated approach from social science.

Most peer-reviewed publications in the social sciences have a very short citation half-life; the average article in the social sciences and humanities is cited less than once a year³.

The problem is not necessarily the amount of available funding. During the late 1990s, national spending on social sciences and the humanities as a percentage of all research and development funds — including government, higher education, non-profit and corporate — varied from around 4% to 25%; in most European nations, it is about 15% (ref. 1). This is an adequate amount so long as it is aimed in the right direction. Social scientists who complain about a lack of funding should not expect more in today's economic climate — the only place where funding might significantly improve is in the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China), where economies are expanding fast.

The trick is to direct these funds better. The European Union Framework funding programmes have long had a category specifically targeted at social scientists. This year, it was proposed that the system be changed: Horizon 2020, a new programme

to be enacted in 2014, would not have such a category. This has resulted in a flurry of protests from social scientists. But the intention is not to neglect social science; rather, the complete opposite. The idea is to force social scientists to integrate their work with other categories, including health and demographic change; food security; marine research and the bio-economy; clean, efficient energy; and inclusive, innovative and secure societies. That should create more collaborative endeavours and help to develop projects aimed directly at solving global problems.

Another possible solution is to improve the rewards for interdisciplinary work within academia. Several funding streams and centres are now aimed at such research, including the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change in Bonn, Germany (www.ihdp.unu.edu). But most institutions still judge their scholars by achievements in their own disciplines. This hinders the development of such initiatives. It could be that we are evolving two communities of social scientists: one that is discipline-oriented and publishing in highly specialized peer-reviewed journals, and one that is problem-oriented and publishing elsewhere, such as in policy briefs. I am not sure if this is an ideal solution, but it may provide an alternative to the problem of shifting the academic reward system.

The main solution, however, is to change the mindset of the social-science community, and what it considers to be its main goal. If I were a student now, I would throw myself at global challenges and social innovations; I hope to encourage today's young researchers to do the same. ■

Luk Van Langenhove is director of the *United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies in Bruges, Belgium*. He served as vice-president of the *International Social Sciences Council* in 2007–10.
e-mail: ivanlangenhove@cris.unu.edu

1. *World Social Science Report 2010: Knowledge Divides* (UNESCO/International Social Science Council, 2010); available at <http://go.nature.com/sqwzbj>
2. Jonkers, K. *Bibliometric Report of Social Science Publications on Climate Change and Environmental Change* (International Social Science Council, 2011); available at <http://go.nature.com/dto1kr>
3. Van Langenhove, L. *Innovating the Social Sciences: Towards More Useable Knowledge for Society* (Passagen, 2007).