

Why Social Sciences Matter

“When reality is unpleasant, illusions offer an attractive escape route.”

George Soros



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Confronting Realities

As we follow the news today, we struggle to understand what we observe and hear, and the reasons that have triggered and that have led to these developments.

We start realising the complexity of the world around us, often without understanding it: Enforced migration triggered by violent conflicts or poor governance that has significant social and political impact in host societies. Technologies bringing rapid changes to the way we live and work while we have relatively little choice whether to accept such changes; uncertainties in our lives increase, which add to the worries of many people. Populations are aging with enormous consequences for the economy, for health and education and many other sectors. In such a situation, we observe political forces emerging in many countries which exploit the moment and offer illusions and simple solutions that will lead to nowhere, attracting thereby a worrying number of people.

Do social sciences matter?

They do! Social sciences have the ability to help us - the public -, and decision makers to grasp and understand complex issues and what is underneath them. Social sciences can offer options to decision makers, options that are based on knowledge and evidence. To be clear from the start: social sciences are not the silver bullet to all our problems, scientific advice for decision makers is not a substitute for politics and policies, but they are a key piece in developing meaningful and effective policies.

Prof. Vladimír Šucha, Director General of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission recently talked at a conference in Bratislava about the 21st century being the era of social sciences. As changes happen at ever-higher speed and as the complexity of our world increases, social sciences have an important role in providing an understanding of these changes, and a guidance to policy and decision makers on how to respond. Social sciences are crucial when adjusting governance systems in our societies to accommodate these changes. What adjustments in social policies are required in response to current demographic and economic developments? How does an education system have to respond to the rapid onset of new technologies at work places and in our environment? Policies are made for society, and the main agent in a society is people. Experts in the humanities and social sciences are able to capture how people are reacting to the policy.

What does it take for social sciences to matter more?

PERFORM is being implemented in Western Balkan countries and our analysis is taken from the context of these countries.

At this moment, social sciences neither have the resources nor are they challenged and supported to contribute to the big issues that societies and governments are facing.

For social science research to provide insights and options, they require sufficient resources and a governance framework that supports and enables researchers to develop their work. Resources that will allow researchers to engage in sound fieldwork, access global sources of knowledge, and communicate and interact with fellow researchers in the region and beyond. A governance framework that provides the space for younger researchers to conduct their research and career prospects for them that keeps them in their home country. Or an evaluation system, that actually reflects the quality and relevance of research.

Research agendas for different sectors need to be developed jointly between different stakeholders of society to agree on priority areas. And mechanisms are needed for policy makers, decision makers, and civil society to work with social science researchers.

Social sciences require a significant shift in their thinking and attitude. There is, no doubt, a space for research without an immediate application. But then social science will have to become more responsive to the key issues facing society and provide understanding and options for change and actions.

Scientists have to work more at being able to communicate good advice, not the details of the science, but the key learnings from their evidence. Responding to the complexity of our world requires science disciplines to get out of their boxes and work much more with other disciplines. Researchers in the "hard" sciences need to collaborate with researchers in the social sciences to contribute to dialogue around problems facing human beings, where individual decisions and behaviour regarding issues such as energy use can have a significant effect on outcomes. Social sciences should become part of every technology innovation and transfer initiative.

Considering the opportunities and threats that societies are facing today, I would go along with Vladimír Šucha's statement that this is the century (or time) of social sciences. They need to become increasingly a mirror for societies to see realities and avoid illusions, while also providing options for decision- and policy-makers.