

## INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SCIENCE COUNCIL

Statement delivered during the Plenary Session of the 34<sup>th</sup> UNESCO General Conference,  
Paris, 22 October 2007

Mr President,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am here to speak on behalf of *The International Social Science Council* – the ISSC – and in place of its president, Professor Gudmund Hernes. Before I continue, allow me to thank you for this opportunity to address the general conference, and to congratulate you, Mr President, on your election.

So, let me start by reminding you that UNESCO was established because of a particular *historical experience*, was constructed on the basis of an *explicit social theory*, and was to take actions based on a *specific model of human beings*. All three are stated in the preamble to UNESCO's Constitution.

The *historical experience* was what the Constitution calls, "the great and terrible war that has now ended" – the global conflict of the years 1939-45 that was fought on all continents and killed tens of millions.

The *social theory* was that wars are – and I quote – "made possible by the denial of the democratic principles of the dignity, equality and mutual respect of men, and by the propagation, in their place, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races."

The *model of human beings* appears in the constitution's very first sentence, which reads: "since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed."

UNESCO committed itself to promote science in order to inform decisions about how to improve the human condition. As part of this programme, UNESCO established, in 1952, the *International Social Science Council (ISSC)*, to connect to and advance the international professional associations representing social science disciplines across the world.

Today social science is used by decision makers in all countries and in all areas, from poverty and AIDS to education, from economic planning to ethnic conflict. Social science knowledge is indispensable knowledge – and its importance is heightened in direct proportion to the increasing effects human actions have on global conditions, most recently made evident by climate change.

So, undeniably, more social science is done and more social science is used – yet social theories are sometimes incomplete, deficient or simply wrong. To give but one recent example: according to an internal evaluation, the World Bank has neglected agriculture in sub-Saharan African countries since the 1980s when they faced harsh financial crises. The World Bank acted on the theory that if the public sector moved out of agriculture, market forces would enter to revive agricultural growth. The Bank's own evaluation now finds that "In most reforming countries, the private sector did not step in to fill the vacuum when the public sector withdrew."<sup>i</sup> Instead, farmers faced exorbitant prices and a shortage of credit and good seeds. As a result Millennium Goal No 1 – to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger – in fact became harder to reach. The theory was influential: it swayed decision-makers. But it was mistaken and its application counterproductive.

This example illustrates why the ISSC is actively engaged in advancing the quality, novelty and utility of the social sciences by promoting comparative and interdisciplinary studies, globally stimulating debate among social scientists and providing decision support for policy makers. The Council has, for a long time, been pursuing this goal by organising, in partnership with UNESCO, research training for young scholars, and by supporting, in collaboration with the *International Council for Science (ICSU)* and other strategic partners, international interdisciplinary activities such as *The International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP)*, and the *Comparative Research Programme on Poverty (CROP)*.

The ISSC is now developing additional activities, spelled out in its Action Agenda for the period 2007 to 2010, to build on and reinforce the benefits of these efforts. Thus it will launch, in April 2009, the first *Global Social Science Forum (GSSF)*, to be held in Bergen, Norway. This event will bring together major stakeholders in international social science to discuss interdisciplinary topics of world relevance and international research priorities for the future.

The ISSC has also embarked on a big effort to map the state of global social science knowledge in a *World Social Science Report (WSSR)*, which UNESCO has mandated the Council to produce. This Report is to provide a global overview of the state of the social sciences – education, personnel, institutions, resources, research, applications – by means of an authoritative, knowledge-based survey and solid analysis. It will identify critical policy challenges for countries, institutions and organisations and hence provide the basis of an agenda for action. The first WSSR is to be presented at GSSF in 2009.

Together, the GSSF and WSSR will energize dialogue across the disciplines, connect research and practice, and provide a basis for the exchange of knowledge and a change of course. Both are intended to bolster UNESCO's role as an observatory and clearing house, a laboratory of ideas and promoter of research-policy linkages.

To a large extent, theories of social development and social organisation have been theories of the North. Since money follows theories, as was the case for African agriculture, they have an enormous influence on living conditions around the world. But theories of development, aid and globalisation have only been effectively challenged from the South to a limited extent. The reason is simple: social sciences in developing countries are poorly funded and are themselves not sufficiently developed. One can speak, therefore, of a double dependency on external actors: for development aid on the one hand and for development theories – sometimes flawed – on the other.

For this reason, the ISSC – in line with UNESCO's programmes – has set as its top priority for the future the effective and rigorous development of social science capacity in the South. This will entail a series of new actions, but will also mean ensuring equal access across all countries and regions to the benefits of new international initiatives such as the International Data Forum, founded with the support of the ISSC in Beijing earlier this year. Only then can such resources be harnessed – also – by scholars from the South.

In conclusion: Since the last General Conference, the ISSC has embarked on a determined process of reform and modernisation. The Council has significantly strengthened its membership base by drawing in a number of big research councils. And it is expanding its reach through broader engagement with scientists, and through working with the funders of social science, with its users, and with policy makers.

In all these ways the ISSC aims to support the role that UNESCO set for itself in its Constitution and the new ways in which UNESCO seeks to fulfill that role; ways such as those advised by the committee that recently reviewed the organisation's scientific activities.

In all its work, a key concern for the ISSC is to provide critical input for UNESCO to act, on a multi-disciplinary knowledge base, on issues ranging from social conflict and gender relations to sustainable development, poverty and climate change.

If the world's pressing problems are to be solved, they have to be addressed by the best social science we can muster and the wisest evidence-based decisions we can make.

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<sup>i</sup> (See The New York Times, Oct 15, 2007 and <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTOED/EXTASSAGRSUBSAHAFR/0,,contentMDK:21470543%7EpagePK:64168427%7EpiPK:64168435%7EtheSitePK:4174768,00.html>)