

Social Science and UNESCO's MOST Programme

Nadia Auriat
UNESCO Headquarters
Sector for Social and Human Sciences
France, Paris 75015

The United Nation's Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is the branch of the United Nation's family mandated to develop, apply and promote international social science teaching and research. In this framework, over 180 Member States of UNESCO approved in 1994 the establishment of an international social science programme baptised MOST (Management of Social Transformations). The Programme's general objective is to improve the process of social sector policy planning, by funneling research results derived from social scientific enquiry to those individuals working in administration, bureaucracy and government who are responsible for policy decisions. The purpose of this article is to present the philosophy behind this UNESCO undertaking and to briefly overview the relationship between research and policy from the Programme's perspective. The article concludes with a case study of one of its international collaborative projects demonstrating how results from social research can be translated into policy and action.

General Background

In order to understand the philosophy of the MOST Programme today, it is helpful to recall the role bequeathed to the social sciences¹ in UNESCO by its

-
1. Encompassing disciplines of sociology, psychology, history, economics, anthropology, politics, and geography.

founding Member States in 1946. From its very outset, the governing bodies of this organisation noted that “the social sciences occupy a central position in the programmes of UNESCO”, that it is “the social sciences that secure the essential unity of UNESCO’s task”, that “one of the principal general functions of UNESCO will be to help improve the methodology of the social sciences”² and that “UNESCO should seek to strengthen a world outlook in the social sciences”.³

On the basis of this unique mandate bestowed on UNESCO and captured by these four quotations, the Organisation played an effective pioneering role in international social science particularly from the 1940’s to the 1960’s. Its work flowed from the dual objectives attributed to the autonomous social science programme, which were: the application and utilization of the social sciences in the definition and implementation of UNESCO’s programmes in its fields of competence, being education, culture, communication, human rights and peace, and relations between science, technology and society; and, the world-wide scientific and institutional advancement of these disciplines so that they generate reliable knowledge on social processes, structures and human behaviour and that their output constitute a relevant information base for policy making. Achievements from these decades include strengthened social science research and teaching institutions in developing countries; promotion of international and regional networking within and across social science disciplines; and development of documentation and information on social science teaching, training and research.

The establishment of MOST in 1994 was prompted by the concern amongst social scientists, Member States, and development and UN agencies that governments’ across the globe resorted to social science analysis on a fragmented and disorganised basis, calling on policy research for specific ad hoc tasks and shrugging off the fundamental need to base development and policy decisions on longer term, analytical social research. This observation was reinforced at that time and in subsequent years by the recommendations contained within the Reports on the five United Nations World Summits, beginning with the Summit on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, June 1992), the Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, September 1994) the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen March 1995), the World Conference on Women (Beijing September 1995) and the Conference on Human Settlements (Istanbul, June 1996). One element common to these five Summits, is the sweeping consensus for a new approach to development that puts people and social equity at the heart of the development agenda. Social science, as the study of

-
2. These three quotations are drawn from the Report on the Programme of UNESCO, UNESCO C/2, 15 September 1946, pp. 105-106. (Public Document)
 3. Quotation drawn from the UNESCO Report on the Social Science Preparatory Commission, June 1946, p.3. (Public document)

society and human relationships, is the obvious centre stage for new and innovative thinking on policy alternatives and social development models. Hence, the need for a programme that could: encourage the social science community to cooperate in a more interdisciplinary and international manner; that could assist the social science community in translating the results of major social research undertakings into policy or planning alternatives; and, that could reach out to national and local government to convey the importance of considering results from sustained, endogenous social research in decisions regarding social policy alternatives.

Research and Social Policy

One of the potentially contentious issues central to this UNESCO initiative is the relationship between research and policy. Although the scope of this article does not allow for expanding on the many different facets of this issue, it is useful to clarify some general themes and concepts from the Programme's perspective.⁴

"Policy" or policy relevant research often lends itself to various definitions in terms of the implicit meaning of the adjective for social science research. Policy research is defined within the MOST Programme as research that may have as principal audience non-university groups, although the results may also interest academic groups and the research itself can be conducted by academics. Although it may be the case that this type of research applies social scientific findings to a solution defined by a "client", it is not necessarily commissioned or contractual research. Research driven from a policy question can -- and should -- be scientifically valid research. Although this may be a factious thesis, such research can have an important contribution to make to social theory. This is the case, for example with game theory, that although funded by the US Department of Defense for its military strategy, also had a relevant contribution to make to social science theory.

Social science research that is policy driven can take many forms: it can describe examples of good practices, evaluate existing policies or programmes, develop projections based on large-scale modelling, measure social change, or it can even consist of large scale experimental research that runs for years. Generally, such research may be more action-oriented or address malleable factors to a greater extent than theoretical research but by no means should it be stripped of a sound theoretical framework.

4. For more indepth review of this particular issue see Auriat (1998) *Social Policy and Social Enquiry: Reopening Debate*. *International Social Science Journal*, vols. 156. UK: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 275-287, and Bulmer (1986) *Social Science and Social Policy*. London: Allen & Unwin.

A final comment on policy-relevant research as seen from the MOST Programme is that social policy is considered as something requiring an interdisciplinary perspective, and as something not restricted to government. The most common interpretation social policy is that it is central or local government policy, designed to meet the social welfare needs of a population, including social security, housing, education, health and law. However economic policies, such as fiscal policies and policies on inflation and economic growth are also social policies in the sense that they have major implications for welfare which is squarely in the realm of social policy. To stretch the notion further, social policy research also must encompass policies of religious and charitable associations as well as private corporations, increasingly necessary in negotiations on pension policy and with the trend toward the privatisation of arrangements for welfare. The scope of social policy research as understood within the MOST Programme covers policies developed through social movements as well as private and governmental institutions.

Programme Activities

The MOST Programme has 18 international research projects that network researchers, local government representatives, educators and practitioners in the policy fields of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity; cities and urban development; and communities' strategies to cope with effects of globalisation. The programme also has an extensive Clearing House and best practices databases on models for community development and poverty reduction. For more information on the activities of the MOST Programme, please contact the MOST Secretariat⁵ and consult the Website at:<http://www.unesco.org/most>

5. UNESCO, 1 Miollis, 75732 Paris, Cedex 15.