

Position paper SSH Council for the new EU Framework Programme

Enhancing the EU's return on investment by improving the synergy between social innovation and technological innovation.

Summary

Horizon Europe addresses the pressing societal challenges Europe is facing. Complex challenges such as tackling climate change, the transition to a circular economy or global public health require a multidisciplinary approach. In several transitions, social innovation is the missing link, e.g. attention to behaviour change, the role of institutions, new governance models and forms of participation, etc. The Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), with their strong focus on the cultural, legal, economic, behavioral and social dimensions of societal challenges and innovation, are essential to address these complex challenges and transitions and should therefore be much more embedded in the thematic approach of the next Framework Programme.

The same equally applies to the EU's industrial competitiveness. The competitive edge of Europe is not located – and never has - in technological innovation but rather in an effective combination of technological and social innovation. The combination of the two reduces the risk of social disruption by new technologies or minimal return on investment, and will improve public support and consequently the uptake of new technologies, and it will ensure that technological, economic and social innovation push each other up in a virtuous circle.

Finally, we wish to underline the importance of excellent research and state-of-the-art research infrastructures, particularly for the Social Sciences and Humanities. The ERC is incredibly valuable for innovation, and research infrastructures are increasingly an integral part of research quality. Increased investment in the ERC and research infrastructures will contribute to the EU's mission to be a world leader in science and innovation.

This position paper by the Social Sciences & Humanities Council in the Netherlands identifies some areas for improvement. In order to increase the impact of EU investment in R&I, the next FP should take into account the following recommendations:

- Increase the budget of the European Research Council to stimulate scientific breakthroughs and major advances and to bridge the gap between basic and applied research.
- Invest in the operational costs of research infrastructures in the SSH domain and focus on exploring the potential for generating more synergies between SSH RIs more actively.
- Ensure a more embedded human-centred approach across the FP by
 - Including new clusters and/or missions with a stronger SSH component in the next FP, which are aligned with pressing societal issues and/or reflect the broader objectives of the European Union.
 - A much stronger embedding of SSH themes within the existing technology-driven clusters and missions. This implies a more comprehensive approach where social innovation is inextricably linked to technological innovation. This should be reflected in the call texts, evaluation processes, missions, as well as in the involvement of SSH experts in programme design, evaluation panels and thematic working groups.

- Safeguard a better balance between technological and social innovation in the context of European industrial competitiveness. The new FP must include an integral vision of the interaction and linkage of social and technological dimensions for market-creating innovation. Remove restrictions, the use of proxies and somewhat arbitrary thresholds for SSH consortium partners in the EIT programmes.
- The SSH field can make a valuable contribution to the development of new priorities and a more integrated approach in the next Framework Programme. This could be supported by new forms of cooperation and alignment within the SSH field.

Introduction

The EU Framework Programme Horizon Europe is the main EU funding instrument for research and innovation. Horizon Europe will run from 2021 to 2027 and has a budget of 95 billion euro. The programme aims to strengthen Europe's position on the global research and innovation (R&I) stage and to address the societal challenges that Europe faces. Horizon Europe facilitates collaboration and strengthens the impact of research and innovation. It also supports the creation and better diffusion of excellent knowledge and technologies.

The urgent societal challenges we face are one of the main focuses of Horizon Europe. Such challenges often require far-reaching and radical transitions: a change to a new societal system capable of coherently achieving the desired goals. However, managing these transitions successfully is a complicated process: they happen too slowly, they generate resistance, markets and citizens react differently than expected, and it is difficult to keep them on track. Successful transitions depend on the adaptability of markets, people and institutions, as well as the development of new technologies and innovations.

Complex challenges such as tackling climate change, the transition to a circular economy, safeguarding public values in new digital technologies, creating sustainable cities and the emergence of global public health crises require an interdisciplinary and comprehensive mix of knowledge, expertise, disciplines and research to create new and holistic solutions. In several transitions, social innovation is the missing link. The social sciences and humanities (SSH), with their strong focus on the cultural and social dimensions of societal challenges and innovation, are essential to address these complex challenges and transitions.

The SSH represent a very broad range of disciplines and encompass social sciences, economics and business, law, and the arts and humanities. The SSH provide the knowledge necessary to solve complex problems, including knowledge of human behaviour, the role of institutions, new forms of participation, financing instruments (such as true pricing), new business and governance models, distributional issues (such as (in)equality) and ethical questions related to the social embedding of technology (e.g. concerning biotechnology or artificial intelligence).

Horizon Europe recognises the importance of a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach in which social and technological innovation are better aligned. However, there is still room for improvement. According to the European Commission's final monitoring report on the integration of SSH in Horizon 2020, the integration of SSH disciplines remains difficult, as does measuring their impact. Social innovation expertise, as represented by SSH, faces minimal funding opportunities compared to challenges/missions of a more technological or environmental nature. Moreover, the missions do not reflect urgent societal challenges.

In the following paragraphs, this position paper will set out how each pillar of the current FP could be improved by making the funding structure more conducive to contributions from the SSH disciplines, in order to optimise the impact of investments and find better solutions to the major challenges we face today.

Pillar 1: Excellent Science

Pillar 1 aims to promote scientific excellence and support the EU's position as a world leader in science. The European Research Council (ERC) has the largest budget within this pillar and has proven to be successful in its efforts, with around 80% of the research funded by the ERC leading

to scientific breakthroughs or major advances. Its focus on long-term research to improve Europe's scientific and technological base provides opportunities for the kind of new bottom-up research projects needed to drive new innovation. The ERC is incredibly valuable for innovation, and investing in excellent research could improve the structural link between science and society¹.

However, according to Maria Leptin, President of the European Research Council, almost half of excellent research projects are not funded due to budget constraints². An increased budget for Pillar 1 will help to reduce the gap between basic and applied research (Pillar 2), thereby optimising investment in both, as excellent basic and strategic research provides the methods, the theory, the rigour from which more specific applications can be built³. Excellent research has a positive impact on economic performance, the benefits come in different forms and the way in which national research and innovation systems are organised plays an important role in their effective use. It is therefore clear that more money should be invested in the ERC in order to fulfil the EU's mission to be a world leader in science and innovation.

Research infrastructures are also part of the 'Excellence Pillar' in the EU Framework Programme. The policy objective is to establish a world-class sustainable research infrastructures that are open and accessible to the best researchers from Europe and beyond. ESFRI, the European roadmap plays a key role in the policy-making and coordination of research infrastructures in Europe. Focusing on SSH, we see that many SSH infrastructures are of a distributed nature, most provide access to large volumes of complementary digital data and offer federated services. These datasets have been collected or curated through surveys and/or human work and expertise in several Member States. Research infrastructures in the field of SSH are also of paramount importance and are increasingly becoming an integral part of the research quality. The existing infrastructures have demonstrated their value and will continue to be an important part of the research landscape.

We would like to emphasise that the breadth and complexity of the SSH comes with significant challenges. Most of the data require human input and expertise from researchers. Many SSH RIs exist with a substantial in-kind support from the research communities. Coordination, harmonisation, standardisation, careful monitoring and support are therefore needed. International SSH RI initiatives also need a long-term strategy for collaboration both in terms of decision-making and long-term planning and funding. In particular, SSH research infrastructures should receive more funding for coordination and long-term decision making in order to ensure the complementarity of data collected, to support the development of standards, to make data and federated services available and to coordinate training and support for the users.

Furthermore, the challenge for the near future is to develop new research infrastructures in the SSH domain on the one hand and to consolidate the European RI landscape on the other. The key may lie in exploring the potential for creating more synergies between SSH RIs. This could include shared platforms, expertise, systems, and tools. A common approach or (digital) backbone for the same type of data could be another way to explore. Increased collaboration between SSH RIs must be at the heart of research infrastructures policy in the next Framework Programme as it will be a

¹ PETIT, J.-C. (2004). Why do we need fundamental research? *European Review*, 12(2), 191–207. doi:10.1017/S1062798704000195

² Science | Business, 26 October 2021, 'Maria Leptin takes up post as head of ERC, promising 'long term' drive to get more money for basic research', [Maria Leptin takes up post as head of ERC, promising 'long term' drive to get more money for basic research | Science | Business \(sciencebusiness.net\)](#)

³ EASSH Response to the European Commission Consultation on Horizon Europe, February 2023.

prerequisite for the long-term quality, accessibility, and sustainability of the research infrastructures. This could be supported by new forms of collaboration and alignment within the SSH field.

Finally, there is the issue of funding stability. Many SSH RIs find it difficult to secure long-term funding commitments from Member States. Current arrangements vary considerably from country to country, depending heavily on the priorities of national funding bodies, on their philosophy, and sometimes on the general economic situation. Certain types of RIs, e.g. cohorts or surveys, require a comprehensive approach and long-term commitment from the Member States. It would be very helpful if the next Framework Programme provided funding for the operational costs of this type of RIs. Moreover, they often are closely linked to major societal challenges and provide the basis for mission-oriented research.

Pilar 2: Global challenges and European Industrial competitiveness

The second pillar consists of six clusters of research and innovation activities and five specific missions programmed within this pillar. Of the six clusters and five missions, only one cluster has a clear SSH character. In addition, this cluster has the relatively lowest level of funding. It is striking that this is the case despite the prevalence of complex and urgent SSH challenges in today's society, e.g. the rise of mental health issues, government attempts to prevent lifestyle diseases, increasing polarisation, etc. The various transitions and global challenges cannot be addressed by a single cluster. The various transitions and global challenges cannot be addressed in isolation, as they are inherently interlinked and overlapping. Therefore, funding programmes under this pillar must facilitate more cooperation across disciplines, private and public actors, sectors and borders. Social innovation is a crucial condition for the success of new technologies and for addressing global challenges, and should therefore be given a more integrated place in the new European Framework Programme. Reducing the separation between basic and 'applied' research by allowing basic research to interact with more mission- and policy-driven areas of the FP would allow better synergy between Pillars 1 and 3.

As the main research and innovation programme, the current structure of the European FP offers much room for improvement when it comes to promoting social innovation. There is a need for a more embedded human-centred approach across the FP, i.e. innovation that addresses the human and societal side of (technological) innovation and innovation for societal transitions. This could be done both by adding new clusters/missions with a clear SSH signature and by embedding SSH much better in the existing much more technology-oriented clusters/missions.

Adding some clusters and/or missions with a stronger SSH component will create a more coherent overall package of research activities and to ensure the necessary social transformations alongside the technological solutions sought. Investing in social innovation means improving the options available to policy makers, businesses, knowledge institutions, etc. This includes, for example, exploiting the linkages between transitions, increasing participation, building public support, defining preconditions for systemic change or regulations that safeguard public values while fostering innovation. Without losing sight of the purpose of the FP, the criteria for SSH thematic clusters could be that they should address pressing societal issues and reflect the broader objectives of the European public.

The introduction of more SSH themes within the technology-driven clusters and missions will also better balance the EU's commitment to a more integrated and comprehensive approach to its R&

efforts. This implies a much stronger focus on SSH research issues within the more health, technology and environment driven clusters and missions. These clusters will benefit from the versatility of SSH research in addressing societal issues and ensuring an effective approach to wicked problems. The SSH field can make a valuable contribution to the selection and content of such topics, which are largely rooted in existing (national) agendas and interdisciplinary in approach. Therefore, the EC can experiment with new ways of cooperation and orientation in the SSH field.

In order to better integrate SSH into the other clusters, the participation of SSH experts in the drafting and development phase as well as in the evaluation committees of the calls is important. All the different clusters undeniably have a strong SSH component and draw on insights from SSH disciplines, e.g. on labour market adaptation, laws and regulations, business model modifications, understanding human behaviour, protecting social cohesion, upholding fundamental human rights and public values, while facilitating cultural and linguistic diversity.

A redefinition of the concept of integration, as recommended by EASSH, would fit the desired outcome of harnessing more inter- and transdisciplinarity across the FPs, based on an understanding of mutual respect and recognition of the contribution of each expertise. One obvious way of doing this is to invite more input from SSH scientists in high-level expert groups. Another approach is to develop a mechanism to measure interdisciplinarity and its impact. According to the Commission's own assessment, it is difficult to assess the level of integration and impact of SSH in the other clusters. EASSH has identified a number of 'design' flaws that have prevented the selection of more integrated projects, namely 'work programme design, call texts, scarce use of relevant SSH experts, proposal evaluation panels and finally project/programme evaluation'. This position paper argues that better integration before, during and after the duration of the FPs is needed for a more integrated approach to addressing some of the major societal challenges. In other words, better integration of SSH expertise in the development phase of work programmes, better integration in the selection of call proposals, and finally better integration in the evaluation of the results and outcomes of the FP.

Pillar 3: Innovative Europe

There is great value in investing in innovation of all kinds. The third pillar, 'Innovative Europe', aims to make Europe a leader in market-creating innovation through the European Innovation Council. This position paper recognises that while there is great value in investing in technological innovation, there is greater value in investing equally in social innovation. And while this will most likely benefit the EU's industrial competitiveness, perhaps more importantly, it will reduce the risk of socially disruptive new technologies or minimal return on investment, and improve public support and consequently the uptake of new technologies. As this position paper has tried to show, technological innovation alone will not provide reliable and sustainable solutions to complex societal challenges. It is therefore argued that more attention should be paid to promoting co-creation, public-private collaboration and socially responsible technology. Remove limitations such as those related to "input-focused indicators, the use of proxies and somewhat arbitrary thresholds for SSH consortium partners"⁴.

⁴ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Integration of social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020 – Participants, budgets and disciplines 2014 - 2020 – Final monitoring report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/075642>

The narrative around innovation for the new FP must include an integral definition/vision where the social and technological dimensions are constantly interacting and inextricably linked. This broader definition/vision aims to promote innovation in an ethically responsible way and to implement the social dimension of a new technological innovation throughout its life cycle.