



Social Science Matters
***Strengthening the voice and contributions of the social sciences and humanities
in sustainable development policy***

Programme Steering Group

Terms of Reference

I. Background

A key strength of the International Science Council is that its membership includes both natural and social sciences. This project intends to draw on the ISC membership to enable the ISC to facilitate social science collaboration and strengthen the contribution of social sciences and humanities, including new ways to integrate the cultural, social, economic and political dimensions in sustainable development policies at national and multilateral levels.

Given that effective and holistic policies require insights from the social sciences, enabling interface between experts from a range of disciplinary and contextual backgrounds with policymakers is of key importance. Acknowledging this, the ISC has led two social science research programmes in the past; [Transformations to Sustainability](#) (T2S) and the [Leading Integrated Research in Africa for Agenda 2030](#) (LIRA 2030). Both these programmes led to key learnings¹ for the global sustainability policy community and aimed to build capacity and networks in the regions the programme worked in. In addition, between 2019 and 2022, the ISC and UNDP project on ‘rethinking human development’ engaged experts from various disciplines, notably from the social sciences from around the world on the concepts and measurement of multi-dimensional wellbeing. The project will be a concrete step to develop these learnings and further facilitate an enhanced role for social sciences in policy advocacy and advice as well as provide a platform for the social sciences in the work of the ISC.

The project aims to foster international collaboration across disciplines (both within social sciences and humanities as well as with natural sciences) to address sustainability challenges and create a global network of researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners to share knowledge and best practices towards the following objectives:

1. Understand the challenges and good practices in developing social science contributions to sustainable development policy.
2. Develop evidence-based policy recommendations for sustainability and demonstrate the value of social science contributions to policy making and implementation.

¹ See learnings from LIRA [here](#) and from T2S [here](#)



3. Build capacity for social science research and collaboration for social transformations for sustainable development

The proposal including a workplan is annexed to this document.

This initiative will be guided by a Programme Steering Group appointed by the ISC Governing Board.

II. Composition and Term

The Steering Group shall consist of 6-12 Members representing various global regions. The group will be balanced in terms of gender and have representations from several disciplines. There will be at least one representative from the ISC Governing Board, and if possible, an ISC Fellow.

An initial proposal of experts for the Steering Group including suggestions for a Chair/Co-Chairs will be made by the ISC Secretariat to the Governing Board for consideration and appointment.

Members will be appointed for an initial period of July 2025 to December 2026, with possibility of extension depending on the evolution of the project and ISC priorities.

Members of the Group serve in an individual or institutional capacity and on a *pro bono* basis.

III. Priority tasks

The Steering Group will

- Provide strategic advice to the ISC on the overall direction, scope, and priorities of the project
- Provide regular feedback to the ISC project team on project outputs, processes and timelines (e.g., reports, statements, policy briefs, workshops, consultations with members etc.)
- Support the promotion and dissemination of project findings and recommendations
- Advise on stakeholder engagement and fundraising, including engagement with ISC Members, universities and research institutes, research funders, policy-makers etc.
- Identify gaps in participation, substantive themes and outputs and recommend corrective action
- The representative of the Board on the Steering Group will report to the Board on the progress of the project as necessary.
- The Chair/Co-chairs will liaise with the project team and lead meetings and discussions of the Group. They will also advise on the need to convene or consult the steering group beyond the regular meetings.

IV. Additional tasks

Depending on resources, the Steering Group may

- Support the ISC in making connections and fostering relations and collaborations with individuals, organizations and networks to contribute to the programme



- Represent the programme in public facing platforms with support from the programme team
- Contribute to ISC strategic or action planning processes
- Contribute to fundraising efforts and organizational development projects

V. Working modalities

The Steering Group will meet regularly online on a monthly basis (more often when required).

Ad hoc working groups may be established for specific tasks as deemed necessary.

Decisions will be made by consensus where possible and otherwise by majority vote.

Members of the Steering Group are expected to abide by the [ISC Code of Conduct](#).

The ISC Secretariat will be responsible for convening meetings, preparing documentation, and coordinating follow-up actions. The ISC Secretariat will also maintain records of meetings and circulate minutes, agendas, and key documents in advance of each meeting.

Annexe

Draft Proposal

Insights from social science are crucial in ensuring the effectiveness, viability and acceptability of policies. This programme of work focusses on exploring how ISC can help enhance the role and visibility of the social sciences and humanities in the current sustainability policy landscape at national and multilateral levels and how members can collaborate, exchange ideas, lessons and capacities in this area.

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One of the ISC’s predecessor organizations, the International Social Science Council, contributed greatly to international collaboration in social science, including leading the development and publication of the World Social Science Reports. ISC with its enhanced global membership looks forward to continuing and enriching this tradition by providing opportunities for inter and transdisciplinary engagement as well as continuing to work to strengthen social sciences in the regions and globally.

B. Workshop at the Global Knowledge Dialogue and Third ISC General Assembly, Muscat

A pre-event workshop at the [Global Knowledge Dialogue in Muscat](#) titled ‘*Science is social: increasing the role and visibility of the social sciences in sustainable development policy and practice*’ in January 2025 began the discussion within the ISC membership that serves as the starting point for this project. The workshop was structured around the following questions:

- How can barriers to the contribution of social sciences to sustainability policy and practice be addressed?

² See learnings from LIRA [here](#) and from T2S [here](#)



- How can the ISC bring more value to its social science Members? How to strengthen the involvement and visibility of ISC social science Members and experts in ISC's work, including in providing expertise for sustainability policy advice?
- How can ISC social science Members collaborate with each other and with the ISC (collaborative research projects, capacity building workshops and knowledge exchange events, collaborative publications for example)? What are the potential concrete ideas for next steps in this regard?

Presentations addressing these questions were made by representatives of the Arab Social Science Council, Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), National Research Council of Thailand (NRCT), Society for the Advancement of Science in Africa (SASA) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), followed by an open discussion.

There was general agreement that collaborative action in the space of social science and humanities research in support of social transformations and sustainable development would be very valuable especially in the current context of deep and increasing inequalities (within and between countries), multiple global crises and scarce and decreasing resources for the social sciences and humanities around the world in the current geopolitical context. It was also highlighted by workshop participants that issues such as interface with indigenous knowledge systems and developing concepts and methodologies rooted in the varied national and regional contexts (rather than emanating from the global North alone) were of interest to several around the table.

Across regions, social sciences face several common barriers, including funding disparities and undervaluation compared to natural sciences, restrictive structural hierarchies and lack of access to global policy platforms. Speakers emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, capacity-building, and addressing inequalities within and across national boundaries in knowledge production and dissemination opportunities, to ensure the social sciences contribute meaningfully to policymaking and sustainable development. Participants suggested that the ISC could play a pivotal role by advocating for social sciences, fostering regional and global partnerships, organizing knowledge-sharing platforms, and addressing systemic issues such as research integrity and power dynamics.

C. Program Objectives and proposed activities

The proposed project aims to foster international collaboration within and with the social sciences and humanities to address sustainability challenges and create a global network of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to share knowledge and best practices towards the following objectives:

1. Understand the challenges and good practices in developing social science contributions to sustainable development policy.
2. Develop evidence-based policy recommendations for sustainability and demonstrate the value of social science contributions to policy making and implementation.
3. Build capacity for social science research and collaboration for social transformations for sustainable development



This will be undertaken through the following activities

4. Formation of a Steering Committee of international experts in social science and sustainability (ensuring that this group has representation from the Governing Board, policy community, external experts).
5. Invitations to a set of leading experts in various regions to author think-pieces to set the context for the discussion (a few of these could be drawn from the experts that engaged at the workshop in Oman for instance, Craig Calhoun who also provided a key note for the workshop and Seteney Shami from the Arab Social Science Council who presented the regional context). These could cover points such as global, regional or national contexts, perspectives and priorities, challenges and opportunities for collaboration in social science and the areas where collaborating with others could add clear value.
6. A call to Members and ISC partners to submit case studies on social science research that has effectively contributed to policy or enhanced our collective understanding of social transformation and sustainability in countries and regions.
7. A call to Members inviting proposals for capacity exchange workshops on concepts, methods and key insights learnings from social science (asking what themes Members would like to have training on and ask what training Members would be able to provide to others?).
8. Establishment of an annual/6-monthly forum to provide Members a platform to discuss the progress, challenges and opportunities for collaboration (online or hosted by some of the Members). The first of these can also be used to identify a theme(s) for collaborative action or international expert groups such as indigenous knowledge, inequality etc.

Outputs for this project would include

- Report: *'Social Science Matters: Strengthening the voice and contributions of the social sciences and humanities in sustainable development policy'*. This will include the context setting think pieces from around the world, case studies of groundbreaking social science research on sustainable development and its impact on policy and practice, articles authored by experts from ISC membership on related topics. This will be an opportunity for members to showcase their ideas and examples of successful work as well as provide a solid basis to build collaborative work upon.
- A series of capacity building workshops by and for ISC Members including affiliated bodies (with external expertise brought in as needed).
- A forum for ISC Members to engage in ongoing discussions and respond to opportunities for learning and collaboration on social science for sustainable development policies.
- If Members deem valuable, a collaborative research project or international thematic expert groups on a priority theme (or themes) of common interest- these may eventually solidify into research projects.

D. Workplan Overview

Phase 1: Mobilization and setting the scene (Months 1–6)

Objective: Establish the programme governance, secure partnerships, and define research priorities. Begin collecting input for a report for setting the scene.

Activities

- Set-up the project Steering Committee. Ensure it has wide representation from members as well as external experts.
- Invite experts in various regions to submit think-pieces
- Invite case studies for social science research that has effectively contributed to policy or enhanced our collective understanding of social transformation and sustainability in countries and regions.
- Invite proposals for training workshops on methods, key insights learnings from social science (ask what people want training in and ask what training members would like to provide to others?)
- Conduct a needs assessment to identify priority sustainability challenges and research gaps. If there is appetite for a collaborative research program, develop a **Research Agenda** focusing on priority areas (for instance; multidimensional inequality, measuring wellbeing-beyond GDP, elements that impact acceptance of climate change policies in different contexts) alternatively establish thematic expert groups involving experts in various career stages, from various disciplines from around the world to exchange learnings and provide insights and resources for policy-makers.
- Secure partnerships with international organizations (e.g., UN agencies, World Bank), research groups and universities, and national agencies.
- Organize the first Social Science Forum meeting

Outputs

- Steering Committee active.
- Collection of material for a report elucidating the strengths, challenges and priorities of social sciences in countries and regions as well as making the case for the need for and importance of social sciences in tackling global challenges through case studies.
- Programme framework document including timeline, potentially priority themes.
- Socialization of the work, partnerships with a diverse set of stakeholders.

Milestone: First Social Science Forum meeting



Phase 2: Foundational report and launch of collaborative research project/expert networks (Months 7–12)

Objective: Publish the report based on input generated from phase I and launch collaborative research or expert networks to develop policy-relevant insights and share learnings.

Activities

- Compile and publish report including the think pieces and case studies
- Launch a collaborative programme aimed at policy relevant social science and humanities research (and/or) thematic expert groups (call for experts and facilitating thematic meetings).
- Facilitate demand-based **knowledge and capacity exchange**, for example, on overarching social science topics for e.g. interdisciplinary methods, data sharing, fundraising and policy engagement.

Outputs

- Report to build the case for collaboration and demonstrate the value of social sciences in sustainable development policy and practice.
- Strengthened collaboration, exchange and research capacity between members.
- Research programme aimed at policy briefs and recommendations/a global network of experts on key themes that engages with the policy community as well as each other. (tentative)

Milestone: Report and research programme/expert network launch.

Phase 3: Continued Engagement and Dissemination (Months 13-18)

Objective: Highlight and strengthen resources, findings and established networks for ongoing engagement

Activities:

- Continue facilitating the exchanges (social science forum, capacity exchange workshops and thematic expert group meetings).
- Ensure interface of social science with policy for instance by facilitating access by members and experts to policy forums to present findings to policy-makers, and international organizations.
- Make available resources such as toolkits and guidelines etc. and develop an online hub to share outputs, tools, and case studies and information on upcoming meetings.
- Host a Global Summit on Social Science for Sustainability to showcase achievements and foster future collaborations.



Outputs:

- Hub for dissemination of resources, lessons and information
- Established global network of researchers and policy-makers.

Milestone: Global Summit on Social Science for Sustainability at Beijing during the mid-term members meeting in October 2026.
