Leverage the full potential of research in the Social Sciences and Humanities to build sustainable futures for a just and competitive European society

A joint position by

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Context

The last two European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation (Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe) have facilitated the gradual integration of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) into the broader European research and innovation landscape. This development reflects a growing recognition that the complex challenges facing contemporary societies cannot be adequately addressed through technological or scientific advances alone. Rather, they require among others, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches that bring together different forms of knowledge and expertise, while taking into account the social, cultural, political and ethical dimensions of change. Such approaches are essential to strengthening societal resilience, promoting equity and ensuring inclusive and sustainable transitions.

Europe is currently facing a state of *polycrisis*, characterised by the convergence and mutual reinforcement of multiple interconnected challenges. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the accelerating impacts of climate change, growing geopolitical instability, and the rise of populist and anti-democratic movements across the European Union are all contributing to an increasingly uncertain and fragmented societal landscape. These developments not only challenge Europe's political and institutional foundations but also raise fundamental questions about social cohesion, democratic values, solidarity and the capacity of societies to adapt to profound transformations.

In this context, SSH research and human-centred approaches to research and innovation are indispensable. Understanding the underlying social dynamics, human behaviours, cultural contexts, power relations and ethical implications of these challenges is crucial to developing responses that are not only technologically feasible, but also socially relevant, legitimate and sustainable. As highlighted during the *Human Values and Grand Challenges* conference, organised under the Danish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in December 2025, human values and SSH contributions must be placed at the heart of challenge-oriented, transdisciplinary research and European research and innovation policy.

At the same time, the research and innovation landscape is increasingly shaped by pressure to demonstrate short-term results, measurable impact and immediate economic returns. While practical application, innovation and economic valorisation remain important dimensions of research, an excessive focus on these objectives risks undermining the value of fundamental, exploratory and long-term research, particularly in the SSH. Building knowledge, trust, societal capacity and meaningful change requires sustained investment, continuity and the freedom to explore emerging questions beyond immediate policy or market priorities.

Against this backdrop, it is essential to strengthen the co-creation of knowledge with societal actors, including citizens, civil society organisations, public authorities, practitioners and industry. Meaningful engagement with these stakeholders throughout the research process can help ensure that research addresses real societal needs, incorporates diverse perspectives and generates knowledge that is both relevant and actionable. Furthermore, interdisciplinarity is essential to addressing the complexity of today's societal challenges. In this respect, SSH are particularly powerful drivers and facilitators of interdisciplinarity. It also provides an important means of bridging the gap between science and technology, society and policymaking, fostering mutual understanding and supporting the translation of research findings into informed decisions and sustainable societal change.

PART 1: Better position SSH research within upcoming European funding instruments

The role of Social Sciences and Humanities in addressing societal challenges and ongoing transitions

Knowledge about society is a fundamental base for addressing the many challenges: from environmental degradation and food security to demographic change and the growing role of artificial intelligence in society. These challenges are both social and technical and cannot be adequately understood or resolved without engagement from SSH research.

Yet, the contribution of SSH research is still too often confined to an instrumental or supporting role, for instance by assessing the ethical implications of technological developments, examining public acceptance of innovation or facilitating the uptake of new technologies. While these activities are important, such a narrow understanding fails to recognise the full scope and independent value of SSH research. The Humanities and Social Sciences generate their own bodies of knowledge, theories, methodologies and perspectives. They provide essential insights into the social, political, cultural, historical and institutional dynamics that shape how societies function, how individuals and communities experience change, and how collective responses to societal transformations emerge.

Recommendation 1:

Support the development and implementation of research projects led by actors from the Social Sciences and Humanities, in close collaboration with partners from Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, with the aim of anticipating, understanding and addressing the societal implications of major ongoing transitions.

Social Sciences and Humanities in the future FP10 and European Competitiveness Fund

Research in SSH is also essential to understanding ongoing societal transformations and addressing Europe's evolving strategic priorities, including competitiveness, technological and strategic sovereignty, and security and defence. Achieving these objectives requires more than developing technological capabilities, strengthening industrial ecosystems or securing strategic supply chains. It also depends on the societal, political and institutional conditions in which these ambitions are pursued, as well as on their compatibility with European values, democratic principles and social cohesion.

The pursuit of European competitiveness, sovereignty and security must therefore be grounded in a sound understanding of the societies it aims to serve and protect. SSH research provides essential insights into the political, economic, cultural and social dimensions of these priorities, including public trust, institutional legitimacy, social acceptance, geopolitical relations and the implications of strategic choices for citizens and communities.

Beyond supporting the development and consolidation of strategic sectors, SSH research plays a critical role in understanding how emerging technologies and strategic capabilities are governed, developed, deployed, contested and integrated into existing social, political and institutional structures. It also helps anticipate their broader societal implications, identify potential tensions and inequalities, and examine the conditions under which technological and strategic developments can contribute to Europe's long-term resilience and autonomy. In this sense, SSH should be recognised not as an accompanying dimension of Europe's strategic ambitions, but as an essential source of knowledge for defining, guiding and assessing them.

The current state of negotiations on the FP10 and the ECF appears to leave limited room for the Social Sciences and Humanities, with their contributions largely confined to a relatively narrow set of topics and priorities. While these areas of research are undoubtedly important, this approach risks overlooking the broader and cross-cutting contribution that SSH can make to Europe's research, innovation and competitiveness objectives.

In particular, the section of Pillar II dedicated to competitiveness identifies four strategic windows closely linked to the objectives of the Competitiveness Fund. However, it does not sufficiently acknowledge how SSH research and expertise could contribute to the development, implementation and societal sustainability of these strategic sectors. Issues such as governance, skills development, workforce transformation, public trust, social acceptance, ethical considerations, regulatory frameworks and the societal implications of technological change are essential to the successful development and deployment of strategic technologies and industries.

By failing to explicitly recognise these dimensions, the current approach risks reinforcing a predominantly technology- and industry-driven understanding of European competitiveness, while overlooking the social, political, cultural and institutional conditions that underpin innovation and its long-term success. SSH should therefore not be restricted to a limited number of dedicated topics but recognised as a cross-cutting and enabling component of all strategic areas supported by FP10 and the Competitiveness Fund. Their contribution is essential to ensuring that European competitiveness is not only technologically advanced and economically sustainable, but also socially inclusive and resilient, politically legitimate and aligned with European values. Therefore, to ensure to SSH their ability to produce innovative knowledge based on grounded results, it is also necessary to allocate a portion of the calls to blank projects.

Beyond the benefits that the social sciences and humanities (SSH) could bring to the implementation of the strategic priorities of FP10 and the Competitiveness Fund, it is essential to involve SSH

stakeholders as early as the development and design stages of funding programs. This would ensure that the definition of research priorities and agendas better accounts for societal challenges.

Recommendation 2:

With the support of Social Sciences and Humanities stakeholders, establish an appropriate framework within FP10, together with an effective interface with the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF), for instance, by adding a social dimension to the expected impacts of the projects, to ensure that SSH research can contribute systematically and transversally to addressing competitiveness challenges across all strategic sectors.

PART 2: A better assessment of research by and for Social Sciences and Humanities

In the evaluation of Horizon 2020 and the partial evaluation of Horizon Europe, two structural problems were identified which undermine the effective integration of SSH expertise into research and innovation policy. First, SSH experts are not yet sufficiently included in project evaluation processes, in particular within pillar 2, which limits social and societal considerations in funding decisions. Second, many SSH scholars contribute to projects without being formally recognised or counted in their capacity as SSH researchers in EU statistics, which leads to a systematic underestimation of SSH involvement across the different disciplines.

Recommendation 3:

Ensure a more comprehensive and balanced evaluation of project proposals by explicitly incorporating SSH perspectives into the assessment of the impact criterion and increasing the representation of SSH experts in evaluation panels. SSH expertise should be adequately represented to ensure that the societal relevance, potential impacts and long-term implications of research and innovation activities are properly assessed.

Beyond the Horizon: European values for a sustainable future for everyone

Europe's research and innovation policy needs to be guided by values that place society as a whole at its centre. This requires a fundamental rethinking of how we define, pursue, and evaluate scientific and technological progress, ensuring that innovation serves the long-term wellbeing of all Europeans and leaves no one behind.

In general, current indicators of research efficiency, largely centred on output metrics, publication counts, and short-term economic returns, are not sufficient to comprehensively evaluate research. A long-term perspective on research requires an evaluation that goes beyond productivity measures to assess societal relevance, resilience, and contribution to shared European goals.

The valorisation of research needs to move beyond a narrow focus on the economic value of technological innovation. Social innovation and the broader social value generated by research deserve equal recognition within evaluation and funding frameworks. Innovation that strengthens social cohesion, addresses inequality, or builds public trust is as valuable as innovation that generates market returns.

Achieving these goals requires overcoming established silos, both within research (between disciplines) and within policymaking (between sectors and portfolios). Indeed, the contribution of SSH lies not only in assessing societal impacts, but also in identifying policy trade-offs, examining alternative courses of action and understanding the institutional conditions under which research evidence can inform public decisions. A long-term objective for work on societal challenges should lay on enabling inter- and transdisciplinary science and science communication, as well as intersectoral policymaking.

Recommendation 4:

Develop a new research evaluation framework that fully recognises social innovation and the broader societal added value of research, taking into account its contributions to social well-being, inclusion, resilience, democratic participation and long-term societal transformation.

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Other signatory organisations, supporting the proposed recommendations: