Input for ERA consultation: SCSS position on the need to support pan-European Research Infrastructures for the Social Sciences

The European Research Area (ERA) should focus on challenges where EU level interventions can truly make a difference. Meeting Europe’s challenges are to a great extent related to how well we can understand social and political behaviour. With its diversity of social-economic systems, institutions, cultures, languages, geography, even climates, Europe provides a perfect ‘social laboratory’ for scientific investigation and discovery, and for gaining insights for policy-making (what works where, when, how, under which conditions, and why). Similar problems result in very different solutions in different countries; examples include the diversity of health care systems, pensions, legal systems and migration policy.

Yet, while comparative research across Europe seems essential in this endeavour, this kind of analysis is currently underexploited because it has been locked into national level data-sets – often using different formats and methodologies. In addition to the access to data itself, the skills to collect and analyse this data by means of robust comparative research methodologies need to be further developed, so that data is not only available but also thoroughly processed.

One of the reasons why the great potential for comparative social science research in Europe is currently much underused is insufficient provision of European-level research infrastructures (RIs) for the social sciences. The ‘European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures’ (ESFRI) has offered a helpful approach to the development of RIs, functioning as a broker for coordination and pooling of national and international resources through its flagship instrument: the ESFRI Roadmap. Yet publication on the ESFRI Roadmap currently accounts for only three RIs in the Social Sciences domain (ESS, CESSDA, SHARE). All these initiatives have received seed support by ESFRI and are at different stages of implementation towards the ERIC status. However, new emerging infrastructures for comparative social sciences research data collection need to be promoted if Europe wants to be in a position to take full advantage of its diversity. European governments and the European Commission should consider – as the Science and Technology Council of the United States has done – that more investment in RIs for the social sciences is needed, and will pay off. Contrary to physical infrastructure which depreciates in value over time (for instance, due to technologies that go obsolete), data infrastructure increases in value over time, as additional data increases the potential uses of existing data (e.g. longitudinal research) and thus makes existing data more valuable.

The Standing Committee for the Social Sciences (SCSS) of the European Science Foundation has been supportive of a number of initiatives in the area of RIs that aim at improving our understanding of complex social processes. A paradigmatic case has been the establishment and help towards consolidation of the European Social Survey (ESS), later also embraced by ESFRI. Other more recent research community-driven RIs in the social sciences have also received seed-support from the SCSS. Two examples are given below in order to offer a glimpse of how the future European landscape of RIs in the Social Science could look like. However, in order to enable this European landscape to

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1 European Social Survey (ESS), Council of European Social Science Data Archives (CESSDA), the Survey of Health Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE).
2 European Strategy Forum on Research Infrastructures (ESFRI); European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC).
flourish in the mid- to long-term future, much more support needs to be put in place in order to nurture the embryo RIs of today. As the case of the ESS shows, a combined effort from different science policy bodies is necessary to allow research community driven-RIs in the Social Sciences to develop to its full potential.

The SCSS at ESF invites the European Research Area to explicitly tackle this need in order to make the most of the unique ‘social laboratory’ that Europe’s diversity represents.

Example 1

**ESF-RNP Programme: Unlocking national level data to make them accessible at the European level: The European Historical Population Samples Network (EHPS-Net)**

The European Historical Population Samples Network (EHPSNet) brings together scholars to create a common format for databases containing information on persons, families and households. This format or Intermediate Data Structure (IDS) forms an integrated and joint interface between many European databases. During the project period (2011 – 2016), the main databases will convert their material to the IDS format. In the meantime, data extraction programmes for different types of studies (e.g. on migration and fertility) are being prepared in close collaboration between researchers and programmers. The intended system is open, scalable and extendable. New types of analysis can be introduced by adding new extraction modules. Anyone can contribute to an extraction module, which will be peer-reviewed and published in an e-journal. Programming will be organised in research projects delivering demonstrators of extraction scripts and datasets for research. The network creates a portal that provides access to the European databases, as well as to important non-European ones which have also joined the network.

On the portal site an overview will be given of all databases, their contents and the degree to which their variables have been structured to fit into the IDS. The portal will also centralise and systematise the data extraction software. The site will present the standardisation rules, metadata and documentation and make them downloadable. In doing so, the existing expertise will be made available to the research community. Activities include stimulating the creation of new databases and organising training sessions in participating countries where historical population databases are still scarce. The focus will be on scholars who, by creating regional or national databases, have advanced the field of historical demography in their respective countries. The RI will allow them to proceed beyond the boundaries of their individual datasets, by creating a common interface for European Historical Population Samples. And in so doing, one can understand the historical dimensions of the challenges faced by contemporary European (as well as global) populations.
**Example 2**

**ESF-RNP: Building the European human infrastructure needed to make the most of European data infrastructure – Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences (QMSS2)**

The need to ensure that European social scientists are working at the cutting-edge of quantitative methods is becoming increasingly important. In many countries there is concern over a shortage of younger social scientists with the necessary training and skills in quantitative methods. The QMSS 2 network provides a focal point for methodological innovation and advancement and ensures that we develop a new generation of European researchers able to use advanced quantitative methods across the social sciences.

The study of social interactions, or social network analysis, is central to understanding the dynamics of the relations between social actors, as well as their behaviour and performance. Complex patterns of ties between multiple actors have profound consequences for their behaviour, leading to feedback patterns and phenomena that can be studied only longitudinally. Some examples of such patterns are peer relations between adolescents and the interrelation between peer networks and developments of lifestyle behaviour, social or antisocial behaviour, various health-related practices, etc.; cooperation and competition between employees in a work setting; ethnic relations and attitudes of individuals with respect to religious and ethnic groups; and strategic alliances between companies. The feedback patterns between interactions and attitudes or behaviour can in some cases lead to fast-occurring changes in aggregate opinions, polarisation, etc. The focus on ties between actors distinguishes the methodology of social network analysis from other methodologies in the social sciences, both with respect to data collection, construction and measurement of variables, and data analysis.