



Net **4** Society

Position Paper for the Interim Evaluation of Horizon 2020

Net4Society is the international network of National Contact Points for Societal Challenge 6 ("Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies") in Horizon 2020. National Contact Points (NCPs) are set up to guide researchers and other potential applicants in their quest for securing EU funding.

www.net4society.eu

Net4Society welcomes the Interim Evaluation as an important opportunity to give input on the implementation and achievements of Horizon 2020. In this position paper, we would like to share our observations with a specific focus on Societal Challenge 6 "Europe in a changing world: Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies" and on the issue of integrating Social Sciences and Humanities throughout Horizon 2020 – since these are the areas in which Net4Society is active and can provide insights. Our perspective is based on the feedback and experiences that were conveyed to the network of National Contact Points for Societal Challenge 6 by their clients – researchers and other potential applicants from a large variety of different disciplines and backgrounds. This paper, therefore, strictly expresses the views of the research communities that Societal Challenge 6 addresses.

Societal research for Europe

Horizon 2020 puts an emphasis on fostering innovations and tackling societal challenges in Europe. Currently, our continent faces an overwhelming number of pressing issues. Europe needs to better understand the dynamics of challenges such as managing increased migration and integrating refugees, dealing with the economic and financial crisis, reducing inequalities or preserving peace in Europe and the world. Beyond the objectives of innovation, the process of European integration, the state of European democracies and the emergence of an (elusive) European identity are policy-relevant areas essential to the agenda of Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission and for which research is urgently needed. It is evident that the themes which make up Societal Challenge 6 "Europe in a changing world: Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies" are as relevant today as they were during the negotiation of Horizon 2020 and that they will continue to be highly relevant during the remaining years of Horizon 2020, but also much beyond.

The research funded under Societal Challenge 6 significantly contributes to the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy and to what European citizens massively expect from the EU: employment, equality, peace, cultural development, creativity and curiosity, respect for and from others. Societal Challenge 6 research has a clear European added value, since it often calls for comparative approaches, analysing different situations in a number of European countries or regions. This kind of

research cannot be carried out on a national level or by individual researchers – European consortia are a pre-requisite to adequately address these research themes. For this reason, funding for collaborative research needs to remain the most important element within Horizon 2020 (and beyond), complemented by the ERC and other components. Collaborative projects play also a crucial role in the building of the European Research Area and should therefore be extended in the future.

European Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) research is cutting-edge and travels worldwide.¹ Europe has a vast reservoir of excellent and world leading researchers in these disciplines – an asset that needs to be harnessed and exploited for addressing the challenges we face.

However, the budget available to societal research under Societal Challenge 6 is not sufficient and does not adequately reflect the political importance of the topics and the potential of the research community.²

A serious danger to the motivation of excellent applicants, is the high over-subscription in Societal Challenge 6 with dramatically low success rates around 9%³, and even in some topics as low as 2%⁴. Such success rates are considerably below the Horizon 2020 average and clearly discourage research applications in key fields like youth, inequalities, democracies, diplomacy, or gender discrimination where Europe still has a high reputation for intellectual rigour. It is therefore of utmost importance to address this issue and improve success rates specifically for social and cultural research – particularly since applying to Horizon 2020 still demands considerable resources, even though simplification is high on the European Commission's agenda.

In this context, the effects of a pilot two-stage application suggested by the Commission in selected topics need to be thoroughly evaluated. It remains to be seen whether a two-stage application process will significantly reduce the burden on applicants and will not result in an even higher over-subscription rate for the first stage and an unnecessary delay in the starting date of the retained projects.

Societal Challenge 6 covers an ambitious range of thematic areas which address a number of important and pressing challenges for Europe, such as the issue of integration in societies at large, inequalities, the state of play of democracies and civil society, the question of European identities and European integration, the valorisation of cultural heritage, external relations, and the topic of innovation research. Topics range from consequences of inequalities for the European democracies to ICT solutions in the e-government sector. However, due to this wide thematic spectrum, the design of the challenge lacks coherence and has difficulties to focus on its fundamental objectives: rendering societies more inclusive, innovative and reflective. For example, topics with the SME instrument as funding model should be thematically connected to the major themes in Societal Challenge 6 and should address social entrepreneurs or creative enterprises.

¹ More information on the internationalization and excellency of European SSH research can be found on the website of the INTERCO-SSH research project: <http://interco-ssh.eu/en/>.

² While the overall budget of Horizon 2020 increased considerably, compared to FP7, the budget available for societal research under Societal Challenge 6 did not, when compared to the budget of FP7's Theme 8 "Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities" – if you deduct the budget for "Other Actions", the COST programme and International Cooperation Activities.

³ European Commission (2016): Horizon 2020 Monitoring Report 2014, p. 132. http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/horizon2020/document.cfm?doc_id=15108.

⁴ E.g. in topic REFLECTIVE-2-2015 Emergence and transmission of a European cultural heritage and Europeanisation.

Insights from the humanities could be harnessed more systematically to achieve this objective. Moreover, some topics focused on innovation reflect a rather narrow understanding of the concept of innovation itself with a strong emphasis on ICT solutions. This issue should be addressed in future topics. Topic texts should adopt a clear language as to what is expected of projects, in particular if they define several research dimensions. Finally, topics with direct political implications should have a clear and realistic description of the expected impact.

Promoting international cooperation with research and innovation communities outside of Europe is another element within Societal Challenge 6. While certain topics focusing on international cooperation within thematic areas such as “Europe as a global actor” or “Science Diplomacy” fit into the overall thematic context of Societal Challenge 6, there are also other, more strategic and generic activities that seem less well-placed. A follow-up framework programme to Horizon 2020 should re-establish a dedicated international cooperation programme.

The adoption of work programmes for two years brings the advantage that, depending on the topic, applicants have more time to prepare proposals. This facilitates access for newcomers. However, it might also increase the number of applications and makes it even more important to adopt measures against over-subscription. The process for the development of Work Programmes and the origins as well as purposes of individual topics should be as transparent as possible.

Recommendations:

- Maintain the funding of collaborative research projects as the most important element of Horizon 2020 and a future framework programme.
- Give substantial support to societal research under a dedicated funding line, such as Societal Challenge 6.
- Dedicate a higher budget share for the research-intensive thematic areas of Societal Challenge 6 in a future framework programme.
- Fund several projects per topic to avoid high oversubscription and to harness multiple perspectives on addressing a specific challenge.
- Improve the coherence and quality of Evaluation Summary Reports.
- Substantially reduce the budget for “Other Actions” under Societal Challenge 6 that are not clearly connected to the themes of Societal Challenge 6. Evaluate the benefit of activities under “Other Actions” as part of the Interim Evaluation.
- Adopt a consistent and coherent rationale for all topics within a given call.
- Identify explicitly possible contributions from the humanities.
- Describe clearly the “expected impact” part of the topic.
- Leave no room for interpretation as to what extent projects are expected to cover the scope of the topics.

Integrating Social Sciences and Humanities throughout Horizon 2020

Horizon 2020 aims at integrating Social Sciences and Humanities in all its priorities and specific objectives. The European Commission has dedicated substantial efforts into the integration of SSH research by actions such as flagging SSH relevant topics in all Work Programmes or initiating a monitoring process. These are important activities that should be continued. However, the

Commission's first monitoring report on SSH integration⁵ has documented the need for further improvement. Especially the potential of the humanities is currently not fully exploited. Too many funded projects in flagged SSH relevant topics do not or only poorly integrate SSH research. 32% of funded projects in SSH-flagged topics outside Societal Challenge 6 fail to integrate contributions from SSH. A different analysis of SSH integration finds even less projects with adequate contributions from these disciplines.⁶ These numbers illustrate – among other things – that SSH integration does not seem to play an important enough role during the evaluation of proposals. It is therefore essential to select evaluators with SSH expertise for flagged topics. At the same time, the quality of SSH integration should be part of the evaluation criteria. In the future, a proposal for an SSH flagged topic that refuses to integrate SSH expertise should not be funded.

There are many obstacles and barriers to successful interdisciplinary work, which should be considered and command the status of “high risk” research. Researchers from different disciplines speak different languages and apply different methods. Interdisciplinarity runs counter to established career patterns and academic institutions – also within the context of social sciences and humanities (SSH is not a monolith). The integration of SSH throughout Horizon 2020 therefore needs further support. This starts with a better involvement of SSH expertise in the process of drafting Work Programmes, continues with giving a higher importance to SSH integration in the evaluation of SSH flagged topics and does not stop with developing support instruments to foster interdisciplinarity. At the same time, the European Commission should clearly communicate to the outside world all instruments and policies that are developed to support SSH integration.

Considering the novelty of the concept of SSH integration in Horizon 2020 – as opposed to a dedicated SSH programme in previous framework programmes – and the experienced difficulties to fully implement this concept, it is important that the High Level Expert Group of Horizon 2020 under the chairmanship of Pascal Lamy addresses the issue of SSH integration and assesses the current concept.

Recommendations:

- Think about SSH integration during the drafting stage of the Work Programme: Draft topics in a way that motivates interdisciplinarity. Be specific about the expected contributions from SSH.
- Assign a vital role to SSH integration during the evaluation of flagged topics. Evaluators need to have SSH expertise and the quality of SSH integration should be part of the evaluation criteria. Proposals in SSH-flagged topics with no or only poor SSH integration should not be funded.
- Adapt project designs to address the unique needs of interdisciplinary research teams. For example: encourage project budget allocation for interdisciplinarity in call texts – since it requires time and effort to follow an interdisciplinary approach in projects.

⁵ European Commission (2015): Integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020: Participants, Budget and Disciplines. Monitoring report on projects funded in 2014 under Societal Challenges and Industrial Leadership priorities, http://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/horizon2020/document.cfm?doc_id=11232

⁶European Alliance for SSH contribution on SSH integration in Horizon 2020, Stakeholders' Workshop, July 2016, http://www.eassh.eu/PDF/EASSH_StakeholdersWorkshop_010716fnl.pdf

- Support interdisciplinarity through instruments that aim at connecting different scientific communities such as cross-thematic brokerages and conferences.
- Earmark a dedicated budget for SSH contributions in the different Societal Challenges and other relevant parts of Horizon 2020.

Achieving impact

Horizon 2020 projects are expected to achieve impact that transcends the academic world. Research funded under this programme should contribute to tackling societal challenges and implementing the Europe 2020 strategy. Designing activities to maximize the social impact of their projects, or involving stakeholders, is not an easy task for many researchers. It could be further supported by different measures set up by the European Commission. A clearly defined section on “expected impact” that names target groups and end users would help applicants to better understand what is expected of them. There are different dimensions of impact: scientific, economic, political, social, or cultural. Communicating these different dimensions and providing best practice examples might help applicants and project participants to better understand “impact”.

Societal research is not able to show its full potential in the current framework of impact measurement used by Horizon 2020. At times, the European Commission itself seems to apply a limited, technological understanding of impact – focusing on patent applications and prototypes and not taking into account social impact.⁷ This makes it more difficult for societal research to apply the concept of impact and exploitation in projects. It is vital to develop robust indicators to measure social impact and therefore to continue the work started by the EU-funded projects such as Impact-EV, ACCOMPLISSH or DANDELION.

Many projects might achieve impact only in the long-term, after the project’s end. Instruments to support the monitoring of impact and the exploitation of finalized EU projects are needed.

Recommendations:

- Describe the “Expected Impact” section in topics as precise as possible.
- Apply the concept of social impact in Horizon 2020 and support the further development of indicators for social impact. Clearly differentiate between social impact, dissemination and transference.
- Communicate best practice examples in the area of social impact and support initiatives like the Social Impact Open Repository (SIOR), developed by the EU-funded IMPACT-EV project.
- Develop specific trainings and guides on (social) impact generation.
- Foresee instruments to synthesize results after the end of projects.

Harnessing the network of National Contact Points

The network of National Contact Points is a vital instrument to inform and advise applicants on Horizon 2020. As pointed out in the “NCP Input Paper for the Interim evaluation of Horizon 2020”⁸

⁷ This applies for example to the key performance indicators for Horizon 2020.

⁸ <http://www.ncpacademy.eu/ncp-paper-input-for-the-interim-evaluation-of-horizon-2020/>

the timely provision of information to NCPs by the European Commission is a pre-requisite for the successful work of NCPs. In addition to close communications with the European Commission, NCPs services highly profit from the opportunities provided by NCP networks to exchange experiences and design common, transnational services. This approved support infrastructure should therefore be sustained.

Recommendations:

- Pro-actively inform NCPs on all relevant developments with regard to Societal Challenge 6, and overall interdisciplinary and societal objectives of Horizon 2020.
- Continue to support NCP networks for the remaining period of Horizon 2020 and beyond to support the transition to the next framework programme.