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Working on societal relevance: Experiences from a research evaluation at the International Institute of Social Studies

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1. Introduction

The International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) organised a research quality assessment in October 2017, as part of the mandatory periodical assessment of research groups in the Netherlands. For the assessment, the Institute worked on the basis of the renewed national Standard Evaluation Protocol, developed by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research and the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences et al., 2016). Of the three main assessment criteria, the criterion of 'societal relevance of research' has achieved much more prominence of late, as it became one of the three central elements in the Standard Evaluation Protocol for the 2015-2021 period.

This paper describes the experience with performing an assessment of societal relevance on the output of the research programme 'Global Development and Social Justice' at the International Institute of Social Studies. Section 2 provides an overview on ISS and its research programme. Section 3 discusses the logic of including societal relevance in the Standard Evaluation Protocol, while section 4 elucidates the way in which ISS performed its self-assessment on societal relevance, with a focus on data collection. The final section discusses the outcome of the evaluation and reflects on the lessons that can be learnt from the self-assessment of societal relevance of research.

2. ISS and the research programme Global Development and Social Justice

The International Institute of Social Studies was established in October 1952 as the first of a number of international education institutes. The Institute was founded as a collective effort of all Dutch universities to contribute to capacity building in the former colonies and in countries that would become politically independent in the wave of decolonisation that was set in motion after World War II.

The emphasis at ISS was initially to train people from the public sector in developing countries. Staff from ministries and other organisations in the public sector would reside in The Hague for a period of several months once enrolled in one of the Post-graduate Diploma programmes or for a year or more when they participated in one of several Master's degree programmes. Over time, the portfolio of work at the Institute broadened, and our staff started to take on capacity building assignments in countries that had become independent. This was usually to set up departments within new universities or institutes for research and policy advice. Research was done in function of other activities of the Institute and had an applied character.

From the 1980s onwards, research has taken on a more important role at the Institute. Several large research funds were acquired, usually for research commissioned by governments and international organisations.¹ By their very nature, such research activities almost always had a direct link to policy making or advising, because of the inspiration that was taken from governments and international bodies.

Research in the 1990s and early 2000s, by and large, retained the earlier inspiration, but it was never brought together in a unified research programme. Research assessments, which had become part and parcel of the Dutch higher education landscape since the early 1990s, were not mandatory for ISS, as the Institute retained its special position as part of the pillar of international education. This situation changed when ISS became part of the Erasmus University, Rotterdam, in July 2009. The Institute organised its first research quality assessment (spanning the 2005-2010 period) in 2012. This was followed by a mid-term review in October 2014 and a second full-fledged assessment in October 2017.

3. Societal relevance as part of the Dutch research assessment system

'Relevance' of research had been a criterion in the Dutch research assessment system since the beginning of the century. The Standard Evaluation Protocols (SEP) for the 2003-2009 and 2009-2015 required assessment of relevance, but this criterion was much less pronounced and less detailed than in the most recent version of the protocol. The SEP 2003-2009 required assessment of

the scientific and the technical and socio-economic impact of the work. Here in particular research choices are assessed in relation to developments in the international scientific community or, in the case of technical and socio-economic impact, in relation to important developments or questions in society at large.

(Association of the Universities in the Netherlands et al., 2003: 10)

The SEP 2009-2015 was more detailed on relevance and contained a breakdown of the criterion into three elements:

- *Societal quality of the work.* This aspect refers primarily to the policy and efforts of the institute and/or research groups to interact in a productive way with stakeholders in society who are interested in input from scientific research. It may also refer to the contribution of research to important issues and debates in society.
- *Societal impact of the work.* This aspect refers to how research affects specific stakeholders or specific procedures in society (for example protocols, laws and regulations, curricula). This can be measured, for example, via charting behavioural changes of actors or institutions.

¹ A good example of such programmes was the International Capital Flows and Economic Adjustment research programme, led by economists E.V.K. (Valpy) Fitzgerald, Rob Vos and Karel Jansen. This programme was funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was aimed at generating knowledge about the impact of the economic crisis on economies of developing countries.

- *Valorisation of the work.* This aspect refers to the activities aimed at making research results available and suitable for application in products, processes and services. This includes activities regarding the availability of results and the interaction with public and private organisations, as well as direct contributions such as commercial or non-profit use of research results and expertise.
(Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2010: 10)

For more practical advice a reference was made to the ERIC guide that defined societal relevance by:

- the degree to which research contributes to and creates an understanding of the development of societal sectors and practice (such as industry, education, policymaking, health care) and the goals they aim to achieve, and to resolving problems and issues (such as climate change and social cohesion)
 - a well-founded expectation that the research will provide such a contribution in the short or long term
- (Eric, 2010: 10)

To evaluate societal relevance research groups had to describe three steps in their self-evaluation report:

- Step 1: Describe or take stock of the research group's mission and objectives
- Step 2: Describe the societal contribution of the research
- Step 3: Compile a list based on indicators of societal relevance

(Eric, 2010: 12-14)

Until the introduction of the Standard Evaluation Protocol 2015-2021, other criteria had been: research quality, research productivity and vitality and feasibility of the research programme. Productivity disappeared as a separate assessment criterion as of the 2015-2021 evaluation period. Thus, in the new procedure, societal relevance came on a par with scientific quality, next to viability, as criteria for research assessment. Finally, the protocol did not prescribe the use of certain indicators to establish societal relevance, so that individual research groups were left to decide which indicators would be more feasible in their field of specialisation.

According to Jack Spaapen, Senior Policy Officer at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, the current protocol is not a straitjacket and offers research groups the possibility to include qualitative indicators of societal relevance in order to attune the assessment to specificities in particular disciplinary fields. Particularly for the social sciences and humanities,

the SEP offers the opportunity to write stories, narratives, that show how particular research affects society. These stories have to be underpinned with as much as concrete evidence as possible. ... The idea is to trust researchers, if possible, together with relevant stakeholders, to come up with indicators that really represent their work and for which they can collect robust data, which are not necessarily quantitative data.

(Spaapen, 2014: 22, 25)

This possibility is also a main challenge for institutional researchers in higher education. They have consider the types of quantitative and qualitative data and analyses that can be quite different for all research groups, but still should support decision-making in the university.

4. The ISS Research Quality Assessment 2011-2016

ISS is, as we have described above, societally relevant by nature. Stimulated by discussions on the changes to the Standard Evaluation Protocol and the opportunities that this seemed to offer for an institute such as ISS, the preparations of the mid-term assessment, scheduled by Erasmus University for the final quarter of 2014, were undertaken on the basis of the new (still draft) format of the SEP 2015-2021. It took more effort than using the existing (2009-2015) protocol. However, this gave us the opportunity to be better prepared for the full research assessment in 2017, where we definitely would have to use the SEP Protocol 2015-2021.

We decided to organise reporting at two different levels: the level of the individual researchers and the project level. At the same time, we focused on three dimensions: the number of activities with assumed societal relevance undertaken by individual researchers, the size (in terms of turnover) of externally funded projects, and the demonstrated relevance of a selected number of big research and capacity-building projects (captured in short narrative reports). In this way, data collected between April and July 2014 were included in the report for the mid-term assessment, which covered the period of 2011-2013. The international peer review committee that visited ISS for the mid-term assessment rated societal relevance of ISS research as ‘very good’ and gave it a score of 2.²

This result was an indication that we were on the right track. However, we were also aware that our data collection and reporting on these aspects was far from perfect, and we had to improve in order to present an even stronger case to the full research assessment panel in 2017.

Preparations for the Research Quality Assessment 2011-2016, which had been scheduled for the third quarter of 2017, started in late 2016. As our approach to the analysis of societal relevance indeed seemed to be successful, we decided to use a similar approach in this review. We again presented data on institutional as well as on individual level; the main difference being the scale of data gathering.

The self-assessment report over the 2011-2016 period (International Institute of Social Studies (2017a) presented a quantitative overview of activities at the individual level for the categories that are mentioned in Table 1³.

For each of the categories of societal impact mentioned, we collected notable examples. The 2014 midterm review had made us aware that our staff would record and collect these data. In Table 1, we only present just one example in every category for a better understanding of the type of data that we collected.

Table 1. Output indicators on societal relevance

Output indicator		Concrete example	Inventorised examples
Demonstrable products			
1	Seminars and conferences for general public, (co-) organised by ISS	Debate series co-organised with the Society for International Development (Dr Kees Biekart, 2014-2016)	136

² The assessment is made on a 4-point scale, where 1 is ‘world leading/excellent’ and implies that ‘the research unit makes an outstanding contribution to society’; 2 implies a ‘very good contribution to society’; 3 means ‘a good contribution to society’; and 4 indicates that ‘the research group does not make a satisfactory contribution to society’ (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2016: 8).

³ These categories were inspired by Table D1 (‘Table with output indicators’), which gave three so-called assessment dimensions for relevance to society: ‘research products *for* societal target groups’, ‘use of research products *by* societal groups’ and ‘marks of recognition by societal groups’ (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences et al., 2016: 25).

Output indicator		Concrete example	Inventorised examples
2	Products conveyed through Internet and (social) media	Series of blogs on the refugee crisis and Syrian refugees for Joop.nl (Prof. Thea Hilhorst, 2016)	243
Demonstrable use of products			
3	Policy contributions (reports, briefings, advice)	Policy advice from the Advisory Council on Societal Affairs about nudging and the role of government (Prof. Irene van Staveren, September 2015)	123
4	Other policy contributions	Testimony on the draft Dutch Government paper on development policy, in a hearing of Parliament, The Hague (Prof. Rolph van der Hoeven, 2013).	107
5	Research facilities used by societal groups (hosting of organisations and seminars)	Hosting of the opening of the 40th anniversary of the Transnational Institute (TNI) (Prof. Jun Borrás, January 2014).	25
6	Projects in cooperation with societal groups ('scholar activism': cases where ISS researchers worked with social groups in the organisation of events to generate social or political effects)	International Monsanto Tribunal (Dr Mindi Schneider, 2016)	86
7	Contract research for societal groups	Policy Review Democratization, Promotion of Rule of Law and Control of Corruption for Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Prof. Wil Hout, 2014-2016)	32
8	International networks/MoUs ISS (professionals, NGOs, governments, parliaments, international organisations)	Co-ordination of EADI Gender and Development working group (Prof. Wendy Harcourt, 2015).	79
9	Capacity-building activities, e.g. through organisation of training courses and alumni meetings	Workshop on social protection and citizenship rights of vulnerable children in Africa, Child and Youth Institute, Council for the Development of Social Science in Africa (CODESRIA) (Dr Auma Okwany, 2013)	95
Demonstrable marks of recognition			
10	Public awards	Plaque for Contribution to Labour, Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research, Karachi (Dr Karin Siegmann, Dr Amrita Chhachhi & Dr Freek Schiphorst, May 2012).	1
11	Appointments/positions paid for by societal groups	Contributing member to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (Prof. Mohamed Salih, 2015 to date)	12

	Output indicator	Concrete example	Inventorised examples
12	Membership of advisory bodies (government, civil society or other)	Membership of the Human Rights Committee of the Advisory Council on International Affairs (Prof. Karin Arts, since 2006).	88

However, we still noted pitfalls in data collection. In the first place, many researchers are not used to collect or store evidence of these kind of activities. Moreover, reporting is complicated by the fact that researchers who are regularly presenting blogs about their work tend to keep track only of a series of blogs, and not to separate items. If staff are interviewed on a specific current topic by several different media and newspapers, it seems quite bureaucratic to keep track of every response. And of course, the different categories sometimes have blurred boundaries, and it is not always totally self-evident in which category a contribution needs to be registered. What is important here, is that we keep in mind that collecting these data should not be focused on counting or quantifying the number of words or sentences in interviews, but on storytelling, and demonstrating the wide effect of research in society.

Further, we included a list of five prominent publications with clear societal relevance. And, next to presenting a list of output indicators on activities with societal relevance, we included an overview of all externally funded research and research-focused capacity-development activities that were undertaken by ISS research staff during 2011-2016. The overview included the responsible ISS researcher, the funds that were accrued to ISS for the project, and a description of the main objectives of the project. The overview aimed to illustrate how each of the approximately 100 projects implemented during the reporting period aimed to generate its impact. The project descriptions made it clear that most of the projects combined scholarly with societal objectives.

As mentioned above, the scale of data gathering was different. In particular, we placed much emphasis on the analysis of the societal impact of a set of larger research and capacity-building projects. The original intention was to trace as much as possible the outcomes and impacts of projects in the target countries by performing or commissioning case studies that would adopt a process tracing approach (cf. Gerring, 2007: 172-186). For various reasons, this approach appeared too ambitious, in view of the timing of the assessment. This was substituted for a more modest approach, aimed at inventorising the main project objectives and the extent to which this was possible, what were its main outputs and outcomes. Long-term impacts of the projects were discussed only by way of examples. We presented this in a separate annex which also appeared in a printed version to the review committee (International Institute of Social Studies (2017b)).

The central element in the analysis of societal relevance was formed by the elaboration of a set of narrative reports on five important projects. The projects chosen reflected the diversity of research work at ISS. The characteristics of the projects are meant to reflect the ISS research philosophy, and they are built on the following pillars which are essential principles in ensuring societal relevance of research:

- Research focuses on real-world issues that are characterised by persistent social, political, economic or cultural injustices and inequalities.
- Projects are set up in direct interaction with the stakeholders and beneficiaries of the research and capacity-development projects. Such stakeholders often include civil-society groups and/or policy makers.

- Researchers frequently take the role of ‘scholar activists’, whose projects aim both to study societal injustices and inequalities and to influence these through their research outputs.
- Research focuses on existing policies and practices with a view to improving and influencing them. This implies that there is a social change objective next to the academic objective.

The five projects and their main objectives were described in an appendix of 113 pages (International Institute of Social Studies, 2017b). The appendix included the projects that are characterised in Box 1.

Box 1. Analysis of societally relevant projects

Community-based health insurance in Ethiopia (2011-2015): The objective of this project was to assess how health and economic shocks affect the welfare of households in Ethiopia, and to examine how the implementation of a pilot community-based health care system in 2011 impacted on the usage of health care services, spending on health and poverty in those households.

Good governance and public administration in Mozambique (2004-2012): The main objective of this research-related capacity-development project, was to strengthen the capacity of several higher education institutes in Mozambique for training, research and outreach in the fields of governance and public administration.

Migration, gender and social justice (2010-2013): The objectives of this project were to contribute to an understanding of the interactions among gender, migration and social justice, connect researchers and practitioners involved in social justice movements, and bridge different ways to understand migration, in particular international migration (focusing on the mobility of people between countries) and transnational migration (focusing on the mobility between communities).

Nationalisation of natural resources: Cooperation and conflict in Latin America (2011-2016): The objectives of this project, were to produce knowledge on the management of natural resources and extractive industries, stimulate social debate and policy dialogue on those industries, and strengthen the capacity of various groups (civil society, local communities, academics, and so forth) to research and analyse the environmental effects of extractive industries.

Task team on CSO development effectiveness and enabling environment (2013-2018): The objective of the project is to support a multi-stakeholder Task Team in advancing the roles of civil society in development.

5. Outcome and lessons learnt

The outcome of the research assessment was very positive for ISS. The international peer review committee rated the societal relevance of research at ISS as ‘world leading/excellent’, represented by a score of 1. The committee report summarised its judgement as follows:

It is the committee’s view that the ISS record on relevance to society is excellent, and that it has and will continue to make an outstanding contribution to society - internationally as well as at home in Dutch society (International Peer Review Committee, 2017: 10).

The main recommendation of the committee was:

Currently the field of Development Studies lacks a clear frame for understanding and assessing quality in forms of research that engage with society through bringing together different actors, linking scholarship and activism, and making research more participatory and inclusive, which creates a risk that the values they represent will become distorted or misapplied through poor forms of engagement. We therefore encourage ISS to continue its leadership in this field by working with other universities, research institutes, and social groups to articulate and evolve such a framework.

(International Peer Review Committee, 2017: 17)

The principal lesson that ISS has taken from the engagement with the international peer review committee is the need to develop a framework on societal relevance that can be incorporated in the design of research projects beginning at the formulation stage. As the description of the five projects have shown, researchers can create societal relevance where their research has an impact when they start from the four identified principles, that is, focus on real world problems, involvement of stakeholders from the initial stage, a scholar activist approach and a combined academic research and social change approach.

At the core of these four principles is the social change objective. Importantly, in the participatory approach where involvement of the stakeholders is safeguarded from the first phase of formulation of research objectives and research questions, societal relevance plays a dominant role from the beginning. This avoids the need to ‘work back’ after finalising the project.

These four principles relate to the qualities of support staff, as well as to the expertise, training and knowledge that researchers can mobilise themselves. Only if the right set of conditions and instruments is in place will the researcher be able to achieve the societal relevance that one is aiming for in the research project. And to show the societal relevance, storytelling could be far more important than merely presenting quantitative data.

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