Social impact @ sciences: the end of the ivory tower?

Peter A.G. van Bergeijk and Linda Johnson (eds)

7

Perspectives on Social Relevance

Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits

During the recently held expert meeting entitled "Social impact @ sciences: Why does Science matter?" organised by the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University Rotterdam, an invited group of participants from academia, NGOs, ministries and the media shared their experiences, their perspectives and their concerns on a number of topics on the theme of social impact and the societal relevance of social science research. The meeting was conducted under Chatham House Rule. This meeting gave the participants an opportunity for reflection not only on the broader topic of the social impact of scientific research but also an opportunity for self reflection as professionals and individuals. In the following section of this chapter, the key perspectives shared during the meeting will be presented.

Perspectives on why social relevance has become important: the Changing Context of Scientific Research

There is an increasing demand, voiced by various stakeholders, for the scientific community to demonstrate Social Impact of scientific research. The factors that gave rise to such demands are many. In the context of the Netherlands, major initiatives undertaken by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the Association of Dutch Universities (VSNU) and the Dutch Science Council (NWO) to introduce a new standard evaluation protocol which has been passed by the Dutch Senate, are being cited as important conditions under which the present movement towards thinking more seriously about social impact and the relevance of scientific research is gaining momentum. In addition, the increased recognition by the scientific community itself, of the need to enhance and demonstrate the societal

relevance of scientific research was also mentioned. The latter was particularly found to be the case with major universities, research institutes and scientific research funding organizations in the Netherlands and across Europe. The area of education (both at PhD level and at Masters level) was seen as an important arena where bridges between science and society are constructed on a continuous basis. The underlying principles and the new framework guiding the overall scientific research funding strategy of the European Union, as can be seen in the 'Horizon 2020' calls, was cited as the most recent indication of a growing movement towards a demand for the demonstration of social relevance and impact. As the current policies and practices of the European Union and the other major research funders show, interdisciplinary research is essential if societal and policy-relevant research is to be produced. The need for a demonstration of societal relevance and the impact of scientific research is both a demand and a supply driven situation. It is also increasingly seen as the ethical and moral responsibility of scientific researchers towards a society, which is increasingly aware of the positive and negative consequences of scientific research on everyday life. The recent compilation of the revised Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) is being used as a positive step towards addressing such bottom-up demands and concerns. The example of SEP was used to show the willingness of the scientific community to adapt to the dynamics experienced by the outside world. Those who attended the expert meeting shared the view that the current movement towards 'science with' and 'science for' society is not just an option, but a necessity.

It was also highlighted that the changed scenarios both within academia and outside of academia, are partly induced by the growing commercialization of scientific output. Today, the social impacts of scientific research travel way beyond the conventional academic boundaries and measurements. The inadequacy of evaluations using conventional publication-centric assessments to trace impact and relevance, was clear.

The growing recognition by commercial stakeholders that 'science matters' and, the need to tackle certain 'trust issues' between the scientific communities and other stakeholders (commercial partners and policy makers, in particular) were also seen as an illustration of why enhancing societal relevance and impact has become a necessity. The context of the current economic crisis and how science was used to justify contradictory arguments for and against economic growth, known as the 'science wars', was cited as an example of how trust can become an issue.

Many of those who represented the non- governmental and commercial sectors emphasized the point that, the issue of impact and the demand for demonstration of social impact was not a

new terrain for them. They invited the scientific community to join hands with them and learn from their decades of experience.

Perspectives on fundamentals: So what is Social Impact?

Definitions and perspectives on what societal relevance and social impact mean were shared by the attendees at the start of the meeting. As with any exercise conducted in the field of social science, the participants struggled to reach a common definition. This exercise demonstrated how the diversities of research contexts, research problems and operational difficulties specific to research, make it challenging to define an all-encompassing definition of societal relevance that will work in practice. Taking the fuzziness of the definitional terrain as a positive sign and a challenge, instead of feeling discouraged, the participants shared a wide range of perspectives on what constitutes, or what should constitute social impact and societal relevance. This exercise gave the opportunity to rethink the issue of the lack of a general definition and poor conceptualization of what societal relevance means. During the plenary discussions, many participants placed emphasis on the word 'inclusion' and it seemed to be an integral component of any possible definition. In the follow up discussion, a note of caution was sounded on attempting to define societal relevance and social impact too rigidly. Given the very nature of research in the field of social science, it is sometimes impossible to capture the immediate impact and the direct societal relevance of research. Impact often becomes evident at a later stage. This is an important point to remember. Being realistic about the short and long term time frames is crucial. It can be a matter of decades! Excellent research is clearly the pre-requisite for generating social impact, but it is also necessary to be modest about the relevance and impact of research. The issue of modesty was brought into the discussion as a reminder of the possible risks a research project may carry as a result of researchers getting addicted to chasing impact in a senseless fashion. One possible manifestation of this could be an addiction to chasing media attention, which can lead researchers to publicly engage in subject matters that are beyond their competence. It is vital not to lose sight of the 'do no harm' principle.

Perspectives on the challenges of being societally relevant

The challenges of being societally relevant are both definitional and conceptual. These definitional and conceptual challenges have given rise to a plethora of additional challenges that are operational (technical). The numerous operational challenges were emphasized and reconfirmed by the participants. This was especially the case with those who have been recently entrusted with assignments

to develop protocols, indicators and systems of assessments for measuring the societal relevance of scientific research. The main challenge with which the technical experts are faced, is how to develop common criteria for assessment across all the social science faculties. The barriers identified in developing common criteria for assessment varied from perceptual (i.e. Perception of evaluations as verdict by some members of the scientific community), to ethical and moral dilemmas. Scientific integrity is one of the important points in this regard. Participants further pondered on a series of questions on the topic of integrity, such as how to tackle the issue of how to measure integrity in scientific research, what integrity should be measured and most importantly, what constitutes integrity.

Measurement

Some new and positive developments in the field of social science impact monitoring and assessments were shared. A few points worthy of mention are: measurements used for tracing social impact are becoming more flexible, as opposed to the earlier hierarchical, somewhat rigid processes, discussions are continuing on the need for qualitative measurements, there is increasing recognition of the importance of using quantitative indicators (although the latter will not be applicable to all situations). As far as the positive developments in overcoming operational challenges are concerned, some participants dared to think outside of the box, by suggesting easy and practical ways forward. For instance, rather than developing an elaborated set of indicators, a ranking of the 'modes' and 'spaces' by and in which scientific research outputs are being shared and exchanged (such as using publishers and via the media), was suggested. The nature of research in the social sciences itself was recognized as the starting point of the challenge facing social science research. For instance, in many cases, the types of data the research deals with (some of which cannot be shared with the wider public due to ethical and political considerations), limited budgets available for impact assessments to track social impact and relevance (often over long periods), the ambiguity of whose intervention actually produced a particular impact on a particular situation, when many stakeholders from diverse sectors are involved (i.e. To whom to give credit for a certain policy outcome when the research has been carried out with a variety of stakeholders including NGOs and so forth). The plenary discussion on the challenges of measuring and understanding the social impact of social science research was also used by the participants to debunk some existing myths and artificial distinctions surrounding social impact and societal relevance. In this regard, the dichotomies

between the criteria of excellence vs. relevance, society vs. market, keep control *vs.* give control, and the idea of research being neutral and value-free, were intensely debated.

How to maximize relevance and impact

In the discussion about how to maximize societal relevance and the social impact of social science research, the topic of the profiling of research received a great deal of attention. The issue of profiling needs to be addressed with urgency. This emphasis placed on the 'urgency' was especially applicable in situations when scientific research is undertaken for the purpose of targeting policy-makers and bringing about a change of policy for the benefit of society. From their personal and professional experiences, some participants willingly shared useful advice on how to effectively and efficiently target the policy-makers. The importance of working with journalists in order to reach the general public was emphasized. Suggestions were shared on how to translate conventional academic outputs into a more appealing form and on how to shape of pieces of information for the use of policy makers. Useful tips were shared as to how to make use of

social media, how to produce mixed publications (i.e. a combination of academic outputs, media briefs, policy papers) and the need to take part in public debates, the formulation of mixed research teams (academics and others) to maximize impact. Emphasis was placed on the need to translate curiosity-driven science so as to facilitate knowledge creation.

Looking back on their own past experiences and also thinking of the future, the participants discussed a number of best practices that could/should constitute a research agenda. Here they are in a nut-shell:

- Formulating research agendas that include not only academics but also other stakeholders from outside of academia. The involvement of the latter group of stakeholders could facilitate mutual learning through interaction
- Formulating a diversified publication strategy that reaches a number of different audiences
- Formulating a diversified research funding strategy
- Participating in public debates as a way to improve research quality and relevance.

Perspectives on future scenarios

The current reward system was identified as one of the major impediments to reaching the pinnacle of societal relevance. The current system needs revisions if the societal relevance of social science research is to become stronger and lead to true societal benefit. The enabling conditions under which a relationship between quality and relevance can be achieved and how to engage a diverse range of stakeholders (from policy makers to grass roots communities) were highlighted as major points to take forward in future discussions. The discussion on the future scenarios indicated the need for holistic and systems thinking and for structural changes to the field of social science, if true societal relevance of social science research is to be achieved in practice.

Conclusion

Participants appreciated the intellectually inspiring and stimulating environment created at the expert meeting and welcomed the timeliness of the discussion. On one hand, participants recognized the importance of adapting to the dynamics in the current environment of research and on the other hand, they expressed the need to be modest and realistic about the social impact of their work. Although thinking and taking action to increase the societal relevance of scientific research in the future is important, the participants also emphasized the need not to lose sight of other equally important aspects of doing social science research, such as, politicization of issues when and where necessary (although such endeavours may not be always welcomed by certain stakeholders) for the benefit of the marginal and the vulnerable.

Critical Agrarian Studies

Regions: Global (South-East Asia, Eurasia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America)
Funders: EC, ERC, NWO, SSHRC, KNAW, FAO, Ford Foundation, ICCO, Heinrich Boell Foundation
Budget: Around 2,7 Million Euro

The area of "Critical Agrarian Studies" has been for quite some time a strong point in ISS-research. In the reporting period 2011-2013 a large number of research grants have been won, mostly with ISS (PER Research Program) staff as principal investigator or applicant, but also as co-applicant. The focus on land is a reflection of the growing attention to global "land grabs", and even "resource grabs" (land, water and forests). First, through the expansion of networks with key CSOs, NGOs and think tanks in this field, such as with the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI), the BRICS Initiative for Critical Agrarian Studies (BICAS) and the Eurasian Land Initiative (EURAL); Second, to submit and win network-based large research grants, such as an ERC grant on land grabbing in Russia; a Veni-grant on transfrontier conservation parks; a CoCoon/NWO grant on Climate Change Mitigation Policies, Land Grabbing and Conflict in Fragile States; Third, to promote the co-generation of knowledge with all partners involved and give priority to excellent research quality and scientific results, as well as to applicable policy-oriented outputs, such as for the High Level Panel of Experts (HPLE) of the Commission of Food Security in Rome, and the development of the FAO's Voluntary ("Tenure") Guidelines on Land Investments.