

# **THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN SCIENCES IN MAKING DEVELOPMENT SUSTAINABLE**

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## **WHY HAS THE WORLD SUMMIT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GIVEN NEW PROMINENCE TO THE HUMAN SCIENCES?**

1. The upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development is a watershed event for the international community. The decision to hold this 10 yearly, highest profile event at a venue on the world's poorest continent, is not just an act of charity: it is an acknowledgement of the need for inclusiveness and a recognition of the fact that 'development' is not development, nor can it be sustainable, if the needs of the poorest – who make up the majority of the world's population – are largely excluded from the agenda.
2. An international - or a domestic - order that is not founded on the principle of inclusiveness and that does not ensure distributional justice is inherently unstable and is, by definition, unsustainable, however much 'development' may seem to be going on. Exclusion breeds misery, disease, frustration and desperation that cannot but be directed at those who are benefiting most from the system. This is the message of 11 September. This is the reason that a Republican administration in the United States has taken the extraordinary step of reversing the preceding Democratic administration's foreign aid budget cuts and is sending its most senior staff to some of the poorest parts of the world, where they have never before been seen. And, if he is not to undermine the credibility of this radical change of strategy, this is also the reason why President Bush cannot avoid coming to the Summit himself. We may have changed the dates of the Summit to avoid 11 September, but the influence of 11 September on the Summit has been profound. 1992's Agenda 21, with its focus on the future, has been displaced by the 2002 agenda of poverty eradication, with its focus very much on the present.
3. For us on the African continent, more than anywhere else, this means making response to human needs – and in particular response to the needs of the poor majority – the driving force behind our thinking and our activities.

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4. For research communities such as ours, which have been dominated by the natural sciences, this means giving new importance to the human sciences - traditionally the poor cousins of the family. And for the natural science research community, it means taking the unfamiliar step of building human perspectives – those frustratingly dynamic, complex, contested variables that Prof. Parnell referred to – consciously and carefully into research designs.
5. ‘Technology transfer’ is a case in point. In an agenda focused on poverty eradication, it cannot be ‘good science’ to develop solutions to first world problems and then simply to seek to transfer them to third world communities, bewailing the difficulties of doing this. Sophisticated tractors are no more likely to resolve the problem of low productivity in a community in which tenure reform is the most urgent priority than MicroSoft systems are in a community in which basic literacy and numeracy have not been adequately achieved. Solutions to third world problems have to start from an understanding of third world needs, resources, societies and priorities.
6. How best to incorporate human perspectives into natural science research designs? When budgets were rapidly expanding and the philosophy was to run science council monoliths that executed the maximum number of research tasks in-house, it was logical to add a human sciences unit onto a natural science research structure. A number of such units still exist – and no doubt do good work. But this is no longer the milieu in which the research community finds itself – neither here nor in most more wealthy countries. Leanness, focus on core business and collaboration to create synergy are the touchstones of successful management in the current business environment – and this applies no less to non-profit research organizations than to ordinary private sector businesses.
7. For the natural science councils, this means drawing in the best human science research partner on a task-specific basis, rather than trying to do it all themselves. This could be the Human Sciences Research Council or a university or a private sector consultant. At the HSRC, our philosophy in restructuring has been to stay lean and focused – staffed by a relatively small corps of front-running specialists and promising young graduates - and to actively seek research partnerships with whoever is best able to complement our resources. We believe this wins for our clients, for the HSRC and for research community as a whole. We are especially keen to increase collaboration with our sister science councils.

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8. This new emphasis on poverty eradication, if anything, creates still greater challenges for the human sciences research community than for those in the natural sciences. Those same difficulties that natural scientists find so intractable – as detailed by Prof. Parnell – are no less real for human scientists. And we do

not profess any monopoly over how best to deal with them. Our comparative advantage is simply that we specialize in trying to deal with them.

9. If I may engage for a moment in an unscheduled commercial, our range of specialist skills at the HSRC has been completely restructured over the past year – though there is still more to come – informed by the need to respond to national priorities. As a result, we are now exceptionally well equipped either to drive or to collaborate in research on all six of the priority issues for South African participation in the World Summit identified by government, namely, water, energy, food security, health, education and technology. Equally, for all of the ‘four paths to sustainable human development’ identified by the United Nations Development Programme, namely, decentralizing governance for participatory development, providing for women’s access to services and resources, generating employment and sustainable livelihoods, and managing the environment and natural resources.
10. For us human scientists, a first challenge is to collaborate productively with our natural science counterparts to realize the potential synergy – not an easy task when the respective parties talk different languages, at least figuratively and sometimes literally. The onus is on us to maximize the social dividends of natural science research by both helping set the agenda and helping apply the results at a community level.
11. A second and greater challenge comes from our own motto at the HSRC, that is, to engage in ‘social science that makes a difference’. The Parliamentary Portfolio Committee of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology visited the HSRC late last year and left us with the injunction to maximize not our publications but our impact and outreach. While in no way wishing to dismiss the importance of publications, we subscribe wholeheartedly to this ranking of priorities. If, as the human sciences research community, we cannot increase the impact and outreach of our research through informing public, private sector and civil society policy, strategy and practice, we do not deserve the public and other resources that are invested in us.
12. That poses a third challenge - of not only conducting more incisive research but also, once it is done, of acting as a catalyst for the application of the findings. This calls for a delicate balancing act: taking research out into the arena of public debate and involving key stakeholders – policy-makers and practitioners among them – while steering clear of an activist advocacy role, so as to retain the objectivity that professional research requires. This is a new enterprise for the research community – getting it right holds considerable risks, but the potential rewards, both for researchers and for society, make it important to try. Through the Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN), the HSRC is doing just this – right in the WSSD target zone of poverty eradication.
13. The New Partnership for Africa’s Development, NEPAD, is mobilizing resources and action against poverty in Africa. It has gained the support of the developed world, but it has not yet gained the support of precisely the people it is intended to help. They want to see results before they get enthusiastic - and rightly so. Here,

in this poorest continent, is the biggest challenge for the Summit - and for us all in the South African research community.

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