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Assessing the Environment for Social Science Research in Developing Countries: The Case of South Africa

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

South Africa has a rich landscape of social science research institutions, and an equally varied tradition of social science research. These institutions are either located within discrete units or centres at the country's universities, or they stand alone as governmental or parastatal agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or collaborative arrangements such as research networks between different local, regional, and international actors, including actors in African low-income countries and other regional developing countries. The evolution of a critical social sciences research tradition in South Africa parallels the struggle against colonial and apartheid rule, where data and research helped to lay the foundation for key post-apartheid institutions. In this context, the intention of this study was to map the social sciences research environment in South Africa, to conduct a political economy analysis thereof, and to develop a framework for measuring the outputs, outcomes, and impact of this environment to development. The study adopted a mixed methods design, incorporating both qualitative (specifically key informant interviews) and quantitative (specifically a survey targeted at social scientists in South Africa and a bibliometric analysis) research approaches.

This South African case study showed the broader national context of higher education and how the social sciences were located within this context. The South African context is highly regulated and national funding and agendas have a substantial impact on specific institutions and research in particular. Social sciences research is concentrated in universities and research councils/ centres/ institutes. The dominance of specific disciplines and fields was also noted, which is also linked to funding opportunities. The findings revealed that the social sciences is contributing substantially to research outputs in South Africa, which is not matched with concomitant funding, which tends to be biased towards the natural, physical and medical sciences. Furthermore, a range of opportunities and challenges exist.

The findings indicated that research productivity among social scientists is increasing with growing funding for research as well as investments in building research capacity. However, social science is methodologically and conceptually/ theoretically stunted and has not developed appropriate approaches to engage current societal challenges. Numerous challenges remain which included limited funding opportunities (more prominent for certain disciplines and thematic areas), biases in the perceived value of research and contributions (including those in relation to performance management and promotions) towards the natural and physical sciences as well as specific thematic areas, workload distribution (especially at universities), and support for social

scientists in terms of mentoring and networking. It is important to note that the availability of funding is not the main issue, rather the ability of social scientists to access funding is.

The challenges to translate social science outputs into impacts raise questions pertaining to the quality and social utility of the research being conducted. This is particularly relevant in relation to the social sciences driving policy critique and development in South Africa, as well as dealing with grand challenges such as transformation and social unrest. An appropriate framework of indicators will assist in informing the development of data collection instruments, which should be more focused. Additionally, key indicators collected systematically will permit comparisons among different case studies (whether institutions, countries, regions, etc.) as well as ascertain trends over time.

The study showed that certain research areas were contributing directly to policy that is important for the country. These included education, health sciences, environmental studies, developmental studies and rural development. These are the key areas that can add value to policy initiatives. In relation to funding support, it is evident that the above areas are to be prioritised. The connection between funding and research areas indicated that increased funding does not always lead to increased publications.

The study found that the status of social science research in the country is by and large not in an appreciable state and much deserves to be done for its enhancement. The value of social science research is not as valued as research in the natural and physical sciences. This is despite the role social scientists play in dealing with social issues such as poverty, inequality and other developmental issues.

This study reveals that a major issue is not necessarily the lack of funding, but the ability of specific disciplines and researchers to access the available funding. This includes the level of awareness of available funding, which brings into question how opportunities are communicated and who the target groups are. This requires skills to be developed to access funding and resources. A great deal has to be done in terms of supportive structures, resources, and systems of governance for the development of the social sciences, and also to attract and retain social scientists.

The key recommendations emerging from this study were the need to develop, reward and retain social scientists (and the need to review systems where appropriate) and increasing funding opportunities. In order to promote new thinking about how to measure research productivity, this study notes the limitations of focusing on traditional notions of research productivity, especially the focus almost exclusively on academically recognised or accredited research outputs. In terms of developing a framework of indicators for assessing the inter-relations between the research environment and research productivity, quality and social utility (or uptake) in South Africa, it should

be aligned to the political economy approach adopted to frame the research which include aspects such as the institutional and historical context (including the policy environment), the funding context, capacity and skills development in social science disciplines, disciplinary (re-)positioning and the identification of current and potential risks and opportunities.