Social development:

from research to policy to action

Draft Concept Paper

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1. **Achieving the Millennium Development Goals: why do we need new links between research and policy?**

Within the framework of the MOST programme, UNESCO is committed to an ongoing effort to strengthen the research-policy nexus, acting in particular through the International Forum on the Social Science – Policy Nexus (IFSP) and the Regional Fora of Ministers of Social Development. This "nexus" is a profoundly practical concern: whether they realize it or not, policy makers need enhanced links between research and policy because, in their absence, policies are unlikely to attain their objectives.

As an example, consider the unfinished business of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which constitute a key component of the current international agenda in the areas of social policy and development. As adopted in 2000 by the United Nations, the MDGs express clearly and concisely a diagnosis of the most urgent priorities that the world faces; a statement of the reasons why "business as usual" is likely to produce profoundly unacceptable – and ultimately dangerous – outcomes; and, finally, a set of quantified indicators to ensure that the international community can be held accountable for its action towards the MDGs.

The unfinished business in this respect is not simply to move from rhetorical commitment to practical engagement but also to improve the capacity to act effectively against the evils that the MDGs were formulated to address. Well-meaning policies are, no doubt, better than selfish or cynical ones. But the history of development is littered with the toxic waste of well-meaning policies that, through ignorance, naivety or wilful disregard for established social-science knowledge, made things worse, not better. The challenge is therefore to establish a new basis for policy that takes account of its indispensable anchoring in rigorous knowledge about how societies actually work and recognizes at once the primary and irreducible responsibility of states for the welfare of their citizens *and* the essential contribution of civil society at all levels.

In this respect, the MDGs are merely a striking and urgent example of a more general problem. Shifting the whole configuration of "development" policy, which is what is actually required, has both practical and conceptual implications. In practical terms, the aim of "bringing together" actors with possibly quite different expectations, agendas, and

preconceptions, calls for the creation of an appropriate kind of space. Similarly, the aim of building on the encounter to establish innovative policy processes requires agreement on, and common commitment to, appropriately designed mechanisms. The conceptual issues bring into play a number of problems – some familiar, some less well researched – in the social sciences. The research-policy "nexus" is an encounter between actors with different profiles; it is a junction between processes that respond to different dynamics; it is a mediation between different social languages. In respect of each of these features, the reasons why it does not operate seamlessly can be clarified by reference to extensive research from a number of disciplines.

Furthermore, commitment to a more dynamic and better integrated research-policy nexus has normative significance. Governance templates that base policy exclusively on "expertise" implicitly dismiss the contribution of participatory mechanisms to policy development. There are reasons to regard such a perspective as favouring specific forms of policy failure. Dealing with them, conversely, requires serious attention to questions of accountability and empowerment within the process of producing knowledge for policy and, in particular, to the role of civil society in promoting non-technocratic forms of expertise. Governments, academics and civil society organizations can and should work together to establish new modes of governance that enhance, rather than dilute, political responsibility.

The purpose of this document is to review the empirical and conceptual basis for such new modes of governance, focusing in particular on the problems of social policy. The key principle can be stated very simply: the knowledge appropriate for accountable policies that actually work is necessarily *co-produced* by governments, academics and civil society. Justifying, qualifying and elaborating this claim, however, requires considerable social science work. Furthermore, what remains to be clarified at the policy level constitutes the distinctive objective of the MOST programme: the innovative mechanisms that might make such co-production possible. By discussing how to establish innovative social policy partnerships and how to make them work, it should be possible to establish a better platform for exchange between actors and between regions, to clarify institutional best practices and, by preparing appropriate publications to disseminate lessons to wider audiences, to facilitate movement towards a shared agenda on the issues raised by the Buenos Aires process.

This agenda gives rise to practical challenges at four distinct levels, which cannot be addressed if they are kept separate:
- knowledge for policy,
- evidence-based policy,
- the relation between advocacy and action, and
- participation and governance.

This document discusses each in turn.

2. Knowledge for policy

Rethinking social policy and social development on the basis of a revitalized research-policy nexus requires relevant knowledge to be produced and to be made available to policy-makers in forms they can understand and use. These challenges are not necessarily met spontaneously by existing research systems.

The connection between producing knowledge and making it available tends to break down for reasons of format (language, style, timing, etc.), but there are also substantive issues. It is common for research to deal with questions that are of no policy interest and for policy-makers to ask questions that researchers do not recognize as valid at all. Indeed, many professional social-science researchers are deeply suspicious of relevance, and tend to regard the policy irrelevance of their intellectual agenda as *prima facie* evidence of its value. Conversely, many policy-makers are understandably suspicious of researchers' supposed tendency to split hairs and to indulge in gratuitous theorizing.

To this extent, it is both important and insufficient to call on the national and international bodies that commission, fund and evaluate targeted research to build policy-relevant priorities into their programmes in a way, and according to a timeframe, that supports the production of genuine knowledge. Policy often calls for rapid-response expertise, but it is entirely unrealistic to imagine that such expertise can thrive without the backdrop of an intellectually vibrant and self-sustaining academic community. Furthermore, granted that producing knowledge does not *ipso facto* make it available to non-specialists, it is

equally important – and equally insufficient in isolation – to create new spaces (on the lines of UNESCO's initiative in launching the International Forum on the Social Science – Policy Nexus) in which researchers and policy-makers can establish a shared language and common terms of reference.

What makes such proposals insufficient in themselves is not that the very nature of social science as a scientific enterprise divorces it from ordinary social and political concerns. Nonetheless, there are significant *institutional* factors that tend towards awkward relations between social science and social policy. Practical proposals can be relevant only if they address the credibility gap from which the social sciences observably suffer. The research-policy nexus can flourish only if it is generally accepted that, in real-world conditions, social science can contribute usefully to a better society.

The challenge is therefore contained in the very words *social science*. A science that cuts itself off from the social world is irrelevant because no one will notice. A social activity that drops any aspiration to scientific rigour is irrelevant because it will make no difference. What is at stake is to open *up* social science without dumbing it *down* – to make it at once *more social* and *more scientific*.

This, of course, is easier said than done, particularly with respect to the kinds of international, comparative and collaborative research that social policy requires. In general terms, such research needs to address two deficits that are, in a sense, mirror images of one another: on the one hand, there is a dearth of robust generalizations that operate across a wide range of countries and timeframes; on the other hand, there is insufficient context-sensitive research into specific cases and situations. Policy failure tends to correlate with an excessive focus on mid-range, broad-brush approaches that are *neither* sufficiently global *nor* sufficiently local.

Enhancing international research capacities in response to such concerns calls for detailed attention to four main issues that fall within the scope of research policy broadly understood:
- innovative procedures to ensure technical comparability and quality in large-scale international collaborative projects;

- acceptance of the inevitable gap between social science questions and policy questions, along with appropriate spaces of mediation to enable such questions to cross-fertilize;
- creating synergy between existing, primarily national, research programming and funding mechanisms;
- recognition that expertise is neither subversive of nor subordinate to politics.

3. Evidence-based policy

Even assuming that research produces knowledge that is relevant for policy, there is no guarantee that policy-makers will use it, and still less that they will do so wisely and effectively. The currently fashionable call for "evidence-based" policy (the phrase derives from a questionable analogy with "evidence-based medicine") responds to this concern by specifying what constitutes "wise" and "effective" use: policy designed by reference not to "common sense" or to ideological preconceptions but to prior practical experience.

Policy is based on evidence, in other terms, in so far as it comprises both a strong comparative knowledge base and effective and transferable implementation models that can be calibrated based on the characteristics of particular cases. But what conditions favour the take-up of appropriate evidence and the policies based on it by particular policy-makers or policy configurations?

In outline, the policy process needs to be open to knowledge produced in a manner that is at once independent, rigorous and relevant. This is not a matter of subcontracting policy design to "experts". In the face of complexity and uncertainty, evidence can only be persuasive, not conclusive. When ostensible evidence clashes with common sense, it is far from clear that common sense should always give way gracefully.

It is helpful in this context to consider generically the characteristics that promote or block research use. These fall into four main categories: the characteristics of the research and the researchers who conduct it; the characteristics of modes of dissemination or linkage between researchers and the policy arena; the characteristics of potential user groups; and the characteristics of the political domain that the research enters.

If one tries to fit social policy or social development issues into this generic framework, certain specific features emerge that need to be taken into account in any serious discussion of prospects for evidence-based policy.

- The characteristics of the research and the researchers who conduct it are unlikely to be distinctive in institutional terms. On the other hand, social policy researchers do tend to be associated with competing ideological perspectives, which often colours reception of their research, even when the research itself is produced according to mainstream standards of objectivity.

- Modes of dissemination or linkage between researchers and the policy arena are, again, likely to be specific largely in so far as the social policy agenda (whether nationally or internationally) is set in ideological terms. As a result, policy input to explicitly political agendas is likely to be common.

- Research on social policy / social development issues cannot be confined to a narrow research-policy nexus that can be easily controlled or circumscribed. Because of the political salience of the issues, research may be used (and even commissioned or produced) by a wide range of potential knowledge users, including advocacy groups. In addition, it is of the nature of social policy that it requires an extensive implementation apparatus with numerous professionals who need access to research results and are in a position to contribute critically to their uptake.

- Finally, the political domain that social policy / social development research enters is inherently contested. Proposed solutions – to say nothing of proposed problem definitions – are rarely regarded as "neutral" or "objective", however impeccable their academic credentials may be, but become policy-relevant only in being filtered through political, and often ideological, lenses. As emphasized elsewhere in this document, this is not a negative feature of existing policy configurations that requires remedial action. On the contrary, the political dimension of social policy is an inherent and desirable feature, which emphasizes

why the participatory dimension of knowledge for policy is not an optional "add-on", but a constitutive dimension of effective social policy.

More specifically, the factors conducive to policy failure to take up relevant knowledge seem to fall into three main categories:

- lack of policy-level interest in research, which is commissioned not in order to have access to its results but for other reasons, including habit, symbolic legitimization and patronage;
- lack of interest in policy impact on the part of researchers who prefer, for whatever reason, to stay at one remove from the policy process;
- lack of effective communication to bridge the divergent languages, timetables and interests of policy-makers and researchers.

Nonetheless social research *can* be used and taken seriously, subject to institutional procedures that might create the favourable background context within which the familiar factors conducive to failure operate less powerfully. The critical perspectives of researchers and civil society organizations on knowledge utilization in priority setting and policy processes are likely to be of particular value in this respect.

4. From advocacy to action

It is excessively technocratic to view the research-policy "nexus" in terms of bilateral relations between academics and policy makers. Regardless of normative considerations, expert-led governance is likely to be practically inoperative. Social development objectives (including particularly literacy, primary health care, environmental protection, sustainable urbanization, etc.) depend ultimately on ordinary people behaving in certain socially desirable ways. They cannot be ordered to do so, nor can their likely responses to particular incentives or instructions be easily anticipated.

A more satisfactory governance model must therefore take seriously the multifaceted role of civil society within the research-policy nexus. Civil society organizations in the broad sense have the crucial (albeit inherently limited) capacity to monitor and to mobilize the grassroots. The policy process needs such information about social conditions and likely responses to particular initiatives, not least because it is typically

more independent than the results of commissioned research, to say nothing of internal administrative data. The policy process also needs the active participation of the people affected by policy in its implementation. Social development objectives are ultimately achieved when ordinary people take ownership of their own development. Without the organized structures of civil society, this is highly unlikely to be attainable. In addition, the role of civil society associations as knowledge producers in their own right should not be underestimated. Of course, such knowledge can be useful only if it is validated in appropriate ways, but still the policy process is impoverished by failing to incorporate such knowledge: the demands of justice and those of efficiency point, in this case, in exactly the same direction.

However, given the current fashion for "governance", this assessment of the contribution of civil society to the development and implementation of policy can easily be overstated and taken in directions that are likely to be counter-productive. The valuable role of civil society depends on the distinctive profile of civil society associations as driven by values and commitments rather than by technical functions. It is not as consultants, or as bureaucratic auxiliaries, that such associations can most usefully contribute. Issues of competence and accountability are also of central importance in this respect: whether particular organizations genuinely represent civil society may often be a matter for legitimate debate. It is crucial, therefore, to retain a balance between the capacities and responsibilities of all parties in the research-policy nexus.
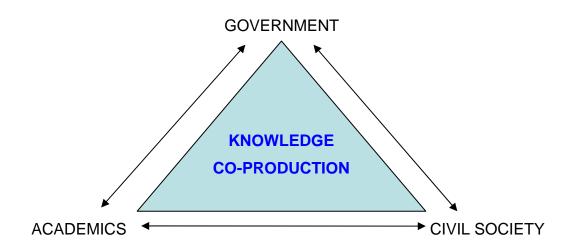
5. Participation and governance: from knowledge production to knowledge co-production

A viable research-policy nexus – one that is efficient *because* it takes account of the need for participation and empowerment – is a triangular relationship in which all three summits engage in two-way exchange with each of the others, thereby contributing (ideally) to the *co-production* of the knowledge necessary for effective action.[1]

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[1] Note that the triangle is not significant in itself: any three-way relationship is "triangular". What matter are the dynamics operating around and inside the triangle.

What remains is to be more specific about the practical steps that might favour such a productive three-way relationship, based on enhanced *articulation* of the web of exchanges involved, and thus an improved knowledge base for social policies.

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ACADEMICS                              CIVIL SOCIETY
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New and more effective procedures would necessarily rely heavily on the existence of "hybrid" fora, bringing together researchers, policy makers and the whole range of social actors to formulate questions and to ensure wide circulation of available knowledge. The key to such fora is to avoid *a priori* definition of what counts as "expertise" for policy purposes and, further, to set them up at a stage in the policy process when options are still genuinely open. This implies, among other things, that such fora should not be subjected to strict sectoral demarcations. They should *inter alia* serve to reveal connections across existing policy boundaries that should be taken account of in designing effective responses. Social scientists are understandably reluctant to expose their work to the criticism of lay people, and policy-makers are understandably reluctant to be held accountable for their basic agenda to scientists or activists who themselves are not directly accountable to anyone. In addition, many activists are reluctant (for very understandable reasons) to share responsibility for policy definition and implementation. Yet this search for new forms of accountability, however elusive, is at the heart of any serious attempt to raise the profile and to enhance the policy relevance of social science.

Achieving participation and democratic scrutiny in practice is undoubtedly harder than getting academics and policy-makers – who are comparatively few in numbers and share similar social backgrounds – talking to each other. But solutions can be imagined and good practices do exist that can provide inspiration. They typically depend on recognition that there are many forms of expertise and on an active civil society that can

organize and put forward the concerns, fears, hopes, knowledge and experience of individuals and communities.

There are undoubtedly many obstacles at many levels. It makes sense, however, to start with one obstacle: the mindset that tends to make the problems invisible and the solutions unimaginable. The call to take the MDGs seriously is a call to retune minds in order to open new spaces for practical action.