

Bigger Role for Social Science Research

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The lag in the setting up of the Social Science Research Council reflects the dominance of the hard sciences over the past years and the primacy of economic imperatives. However, fresh challenges of social transformation and evolving markets cannot be met by technological solutions alone. Many issues call for an interdisciplinary approach, like shaping complex policies to cater to a diversified population, or shaping culturally value-added products for global marketplaces, or delivering "personalised medicine" - customised healthcare that takes into account social attitudes and behaviour.

As social sciences is a wide field and resources are limited, the council ought to focus more on the intersection of key domains, Singapore's particular concerns and those of Asian societies. The findings of targeted research could help planners to frame policies that suit different sections of society, in contrast to the single set of measures that once could benefit most of the population simultaneously. In addressing climate change, for example, one has to acknowledge the limitations of technology and seek inputs from sociologists, psychologists and cultural studies researchers on how lifestyles can be changed to mitigate its impact.

A cost-effective research framework would be one that is strong on empirical fundamentals and with clear and realistic policy outcomes in view. Strategies on ageing, population and talent policies, housing and transport options, and ethnic cohesion are some areas in which the council could encourage the work of existing institutions. One example is the Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies. Its research on perceptions, attitudes and behaviour strives to capture the reality of Singapore's social evolution.

As a national institution, the Social Science Research Council could play a role similar to that of the Agency for Science, Technology and Research in promoting valuable scientific work. The council should also be involved in the framing of a wide range of policy questions, alongside planners from different disciplines.

How the new council is to evolve will be the remit of its pioneering members. America's Social Science Research Council, for example, is known for fostering innovative, problem-solving research on insistent issues in human development. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences provides an academic running commentary on mega-trends, including the social consequences of China's economic reforms. The Indian Council of Social Science Research also charts the country's transformation. What they all underscore is the vital role of social sciences and the humanities in our times.