Mission Covid-19:
Global problems need a research portfolio approach

EASSH calls for European policymakers and funding agencies to ensure that all domains of research are mobilised to address the challenges of Covid-19, using a mission-type "portfolio approach" of projects and disciplines. In addition to medical and biological research, studies into the social, cultural and human aspects of our lives are crucial for tackling this crisis. We need multiple and diverse types of expertise and methodologies to provide the accurate, informed and ethically sound evidence required by our policymakers.

Context

Covid-19 presents today's world with one of the biggest challenges ever. One might say that defeating Covid-19 is the ultimate "mission" of the moment. It is not only a biomedical challenge but one that concerns the organisation of society at large. This crisis has revealed like never before the acuity of questions about inequality, freedom and resilience (both individual and collective), and the importance that this is appreciated at the highest political levels. **The research on the fundamental themes of inequality, social cohesion, freedom and democracy is at the heart of the proposed Cluster 2 in Horizon Europe**, and other areas of the programme as Health, Climate and Energy, Artificial Intelligence, Food and Environment need to include interventions areas driven by social and humanities research. The necessity to strengthen and support this research now and in the future has never been more evident and pressing.

We need to recognise that this crisis is as much about society and politics as it is about virology, immunology and economics.[1] Covid-19 is not just a virus to be defeated with a vaccine; this crisis is a race to identify society's most vulnerable people and better understand how socio-economic status affects members of at-risk groups during public health crises.[2] The crisis provides an urgent reason to gather and interpret social data about our relations, behaviour, cultural norms, values, and to identify and understand patterns of human resilience from historical data. This is an economic crisis, it is a mental health emergency, it is a domestic violence alarm, and it is a remaking of our environments – physical, cultural and political.[3] The European project itself is at stake, as some scholars have begun to argue.[4] Without the insights of the humanities and social sciences, we will not be able to comprehensively understand and provide evidence for political decision making during and – even more - after the crisis.

Some national research councils are investing in emergency calls for research that include investigating socio-economic effects or recalling historical examples of pandemic spread (e.g. in Germany). Much more needs to be done to achieve the necessary multi-disciplinary approach and global perspective in our responses. National research has been key to supporting local reactions to the crisis. However, viruses do not respect national borders and our efforts to understand and tackle the problem must benefit from 'cross-border' perspectives. We need a better aggregation of

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[1] https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0421/1132824-why-we-need-more-than-just-scientists-to-document-the-pandemic/
[2] https://www.oslomet.no/en/research/featured-research/are-measures-to-control-corona-spread-working
[3] *German humanities scholars enlisted to end Coronavirus lock down*
[4] https://aoc.media/analyse/2020/04/09/le-covid-19-un-tournant-pour-lunion-europeenne/

data and research outputs and 'ready access' to investigation results. We need to ensure that we recognise the fundamental social and economic interconnections across Europe.

Public health policymakers are already making increasing demands for social science data and for humanistic insights. The European Commission (EC) is coordinating a common European response to the coronavirus outbreak, involving scientific experts from virologists to anthropologists and philosophers. R&I units are making available the results of numerous past and current research actions related to other coronavirus outbreaks, including fundamental contributions from SSH projects, like the ones in the World Pandemic Research Network[5] or for example in ERC schemes.[6] The EC has approved the first "ERA vs Corona" Action plan: short term coordinated research and innovation actions which presents ten priority actions, including social science data infrastructures and the scientific contribution of all disciplines and industries. While the first phase of the emergency may have prioritised health-related research (e.g. designing better respirators, vaccines and clinical trials), it is recognised that slowing the spread of a pandemic disease requires understanding people in their social and human relations and environments and respecting their fundamental rights, including issues of privacy and data protection. In the second phase, research on issues like re-building the economy, inequalities, flexible working, individual behaviours and collective action will be even more relevant while learning to leave with a new virus, even with a vaccine. This is also spell out by the Irish Humanities Alliance papers.[7]

In previous papers, EASSH has suggested how global research "missions" need to be approached covering the full spectrum of scientific fields in order not merely to address current crises but to build resilience for the future.[8] EASSH calls for all research funders to endorse the European Commission's effort to support pan-domain research and innovation and to coordinate European and global research efforts, including preparedness for future pandemics.

Recommendations

We urge national ministries and European institutions to take two key actions:

1. Designate the COVID-19 crisis as a research "mission", requiring a portfolio approach where contributions from many disciplines, including humanities and social sciences, are brought together to address the multiplicity of interrelated research questions.
2. Ensure that scholars from all scientific domains, including the humanities and social sciences, are active participants in all expert task forces dealing with framing the challenges of the crisis from different perspectives and with dedicated set of data.

With reference to Research and Innovation, we call for both national and European funders to:

1. Support and fund research projects from different disciplines on Covid-19 including the studies of vital importance provided by the humanities, social sciences and creative arts.
2. Ensure the research approaches of social science and humanities are funded to contribute to current and future missions. Methodological work and dissemination, historical data, and databases will be crucial to address forthcoming challenges. New solutions will also require careful consideration of fundamental rights such as privacy and data protection.

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[5] EASSH is a key partner of WPRN, a global, edited and searchable directory consolidating research projects on societal impacts and aftermaths of Covid-19 (www.wprn.org).

[6] For example see ERC projects: https://erc.europa.eu/list-erc-funded-research-projects-related-coronavirus

[7] IHA Strategic response to Covid-19 https://www.irishhumanities.com/assets/Uploads/IHA-Covid-19-Response-1-May-2020.pdf and Appeal for IRC funding https://www.irishhumanities.com/assets/Uploads/IHA-Calls-for-AHSS-Covid-19-Research-Funding.pdf

[8] EASSH papers: *Improving Research Impact Assessment in Horizon Europe: A Perspective from the Social Sciences and Humanities*; *FP9 's ambitious aims for societal impact call for a step change in interdisciplinarity and citizen engagement*; http://www.eassh.eu/position-papers

3. Inform future research and policy strategies using insights emerging from the current crisis around the intersection between public health, structural inequalities, political systems, and cultural norms and values. Hereby it will key to look into the interaction and tensions between national and European levels and the need for coordination at the European level to ensure efficiency, transparency and global presence.