Mapping Social Sciences Research in South Africa

A report submitted by the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Background and Objectives

1. *Research has an increasingly active role to play in DFID's efforts to reduce poverty at the country level. However, the in-country research landscape that DFID operates in is often little understood. In response, DFID has published series of research mapping studies in India, Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively. Building on the experience of research mapping in South Asia, this project has provided the opportunity to design and commission a similar mapping exercise in South Africa.*

2. *This report is presented in two parts: Part I includes a mapping exercise that describes and analyses the social science research landscape in South Africa while Part II presents a synthesis of the existing analysis of political economy of the commissioning, undertaking and dissemination of research in South Africa to address gaps in knowledge production. The study focuses on social science research and evaluation with a closer assessment of the health and environment/climate sectors.*

3. *A key product of the project is a database of prominent research centres working within the social sciences and evaluation, health and climate and environment.*

Methodology

4. *This study of mapping social science research in South Africa required both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The first phase, which consisted of desktop research, identified all research organisations in South Africa, including those in the governmental and non-profit sectors, which needed to be included in the study. It was subsequently decided that a web-based survey would be the most appropriate design to cover the key social research organisations in South Africa. In addition to conducting two different web surveys, a number of telephonic interviews with prominent and leading social scientists in South Africa were conducted which provided more nuanced and detailed elaborations of the information collected through the web-surveys.*

5. *Although the CREST team is situated at the University of Stellenbosch, no significant conflict of interests exists in producing the results. The University of Stellenbosch is amongst the top universities in South Africa and therefore many prominent research centres are situated at the University of Stellenbosch as is the case with the University of Cape Town and the University of Pretoria.*

Overview of the South African research landscape

6. *South Africa has a long tradition in social sciences research that goes back at least eighty years to the first major interdisciplinary and applied study (Carnegie Investigation into the Poor White). It is also a strong tradition – as witnessed in the establishment and funding of a science council dedicated to the social sciences (the Human Sciences Research Council est. in 1969) as well as sustained and increased expenditure on the social sciences over the past ten years (14% of national expenditure on the sciences is devoted to the social sciences and*

humanities). But it is also a chequered tradition as its history is intimately intertwined with the political economy of the South African state.

Mapping

7. *The mapping of research centres, which is presented in Part I of the Report, resulted in the identification of key institutions and research groups that carry out social science research in South Africa and their main areas of focus. Research centres were mapped in evaluation studies, social sciences research, centres working at the intersection of social sciences and health, and social sciences and climate/environment.*

8. *A significant proportion of social science research in the country is conducted by individual academics (and doctoral students) across the whole range of scientific disciplines. But social science research is also concentrated in research institutes, centres and units. The majority of these are based at the 23 Universities and Universities of Technology, but there are also major centres and programmes located at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), government departments and within civil society.*

9. *The mapping of research centres and institutes has identified a total of 215 research centres that were classified as belonging to the broad domain of the social sciences, 56 centres and units that were classified as belonging to the interdisciplinary domain of the social sciences and health and 39 centres which work at the interface between the social sciences and climate/environmental research.*

Mapping of research centres	215
Evaluation	**18**
Universities	4
NGOs	7
Parastatals	7
Social Sciences	**102**
Universities	95
NGOs	3
Parastatals	4
Social Sciences Health	**56**
Universities	40
NGOs	1
Parastatals	15
Social Sciences Climate	**39**
Universities	38
NGOs	1
Parastatals	(2)[1]

10. *Disaggregating the research centres in the different social sciences groupings resulted in a more refined mapping by discipline or field. Our analysis shows that the largest number of centres and units are found in the following fields: Development Studies, HIV/AIDS, Governance and Democracy, Education, Policy Studies (in various fields), Public and Community Health; Environmental and Sustainability studies.*

Social Sciences Research

11. *Over the last decade the capacity in social sciences research in South Africa has increased significantly (a six-fold increase between 1993 and 2012) as evidenced from a bibliometric analysis of article output in the Web of Science. One possible reason for this increase in research output is the increase in state funding for the social sciences. The social sciences in South Africa have received annually, between 2001 and 2011, a four per cent increase of state funding. The survey results concerning sources of funding indicated that research centres' surveyed main sources of funding included the South African government or internal/institutional funding.*

12. *The results of our surveys indicated that the United Kingdom provides financial support to many centres (approximately 30% of all centres and 11% of all individual respondents), but that they are not a significant contributor to South African research in the social sciences. They do, however, become more significant when funding for the social sciences and health*

are concerned. Foreign governments were found to be the most prominent in providing funding for large research projects.

13. *The study mapped 102 research centres working in the social sciences of which 95 are based at South African Universities. This indicates a strong capacity and vibrant scientific culture for producing social sciences research in South Africa. This is particularly true for disciplines such as economic, business and management studies as echoed by the bibliometric analysis. A strong capacity for research within political science, governance and international relations – particularly those focusing on conflict resolution, reconciliation and security studies – is present and is undoubtedly a result of South Africa's recent political history. The HSRC proves a competent and willing partner to social scientists in South Africa albeit somewhat overshadowed by higher education institutions.*

14. *Collaboration between South Africa and the UK in terms of social sciences research is more established than collaboration between South Africa and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Indications are that collaboration between South Africa and other African countries (especially in the field of the social sciences and health) is growing because of the involvement of internationally based (and also UK-based) research teams, among which the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.*

Social Sciences and Health Research

15. *The country's article output in the two topical areas – health and climate – is associated with high average annual growth rates. In health-related social sciences, the growth rate for articles in the Web of Science (WoS) over the relevant 20-year period (1993-2012) is 21%, and in social sciences research on climate change it is 18%. About 70% of all health-related social sciences articles have a focus on HIV/AIDS. International collaboration is the most prominent in the case of health-related social sciences (in 2008-2012, 56% of all South Africa's articles in this domain involved international co-authorship). In that same period scientists in the UK contributed to 54% of all South Africa's internationally co-authored articles in the health-related social sciences.*

16. *Our survey results indicated that centres working at the intersection of social sciences and health have received more funding from the UK than centres working in the general social sciences and climate and environment. A large number of research centres working within the health sector focus on HIV/AIDS research. This is not surprising given South Africa's high HIV/AIDS infection rates. There is, however, also strong capacity for research in health policy and health economics. Once again, this can be attributed to the health challenges facing South Africa, but also sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.*

17. *The Medical Research Council is a significant contributor to research programmes. There are many established partnerships between the MRC and university departments, particularly at the University of Cape Town. The MRC is very well funded by the South African government particularly with regards to public health.*

Social Sciences and Climate/Environmental Research

18. *Social science and climate research as a "scientific" area is fairly small and underdeveloped in South Africa with only 2% of articles produced in 2012 in South Africa (according to WoS). Forty one research centres working at the intersection of the social sciences and climate/environment were identified in our study with the majority being housed at South African universities. It appears that there is a strong capacity for research within policy*

studies (agriculture/food/security/energy/water) which is consistent with the strengths identified in health policy research. Research centres working in the field of sustainability are represented fairly well in our mapping of research centres and indicates the need to finding sustainable solutions in a country with a rapid growing population.

Evaluation Research

19. *Eighteen research centres on evaluation studies were identified in our study. This is an indication perhaps of a rather limited capacity for research in evaluation studies in South Africa. Of those centres that focus purely on M&E activities, the majority are NGOs.*

Political Economy Analysis

20. *For the purposes of this report (Part II) "political economy" was defined as the systematic study of the interactions of individuals and institutions in political and economic context. In our view the economic embraces the technological since they are in constant interaction. History and historical forces inform political economy. In the South African research and innovation system this expresses itself in the distribution, form and function of its component institutions, organisations and spaces that continue to reflect the historical legacies of colonial and post-colonial (especially apartheid) forces.*

State of Social Sciences in South Africa

21. *Since the late-1990s, a number of interesting initiatives in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) have been undertaken within the country's universities. The purpose of these has been to find creative ways in which the HSS can rediscover themselves and, at the same time, project their importance in society. In 2010, the Minister of Higher Education and Training (MHET) appointed a Task Team to develop a Charter on Humanities and Social Sciences aimed at affirming the importance of human and social forms of scholarship. The charter states that all students (irrespective of discipline) should have an understanding of the "social, the symbolic and the implication of the recent scientific revolutions" but that it is "equally vital that they all learn about the social revolutions" (2010:14). The charter therefore regards the HSS to be of equal importance compared to that of the STEM sciences. Despite this normative positioning of the social sciences within the scientific system, the de facto position of the HSS has been extensively debated.*

22. *A consensus study on the state of the Humanities in South Africa, published by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) in 2011, reiterated this deepening disregard of the HSS in society. The report claims that the decline of the HSS in South Africa is caused by government policy and insufficient funding, institutional choices and decision making, school guidance and counselling and parental and student preferences. The scholarship of the HSS still strongly reflects the racial inequalities in knowledge production in the national science system, with all but one (Education) of the HSS fields falling well below 20% of total output contributions on the part of black scholars – despite marginal gains over the previous decades.*

Enablers of social sciences research

23. *Over the past decade GERD has grown by 270% and the share of SSH has risen from 10,7% to 14,7%. University R&D expenditure, or HERD, has grown 300%, and within the university sector the share of SSH has remained more or less steady, averaging 33%.*

Policy and Framework

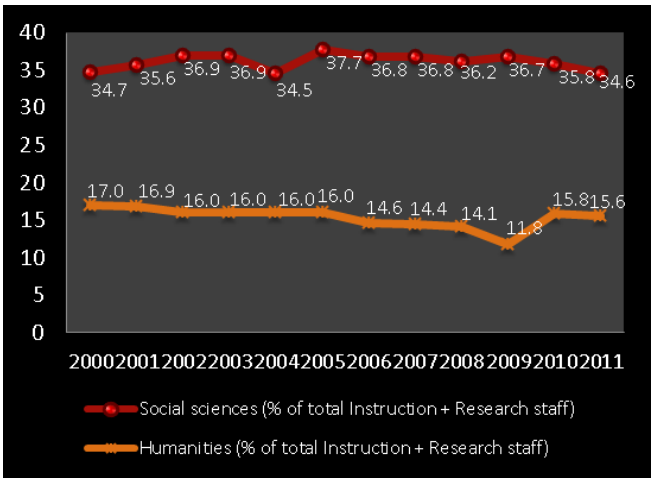
24. *An important stance was publicly taken by the Ministry of Higher Education and Training as well as the Academy of Science of South Africa in support of the social sciences. The proposal for an Academy/Institute/Entity of Humanities and Social Sciences reaffirms the place and importance of the social sciences in South Africa's research landscape.*

25. *The National Research Foundation (NRF) in 2001 established an individualised evaluation and rating system of funded researchers in South Africa. This rating system serves as a peer-based benchmarking system of each applicant's recent research outputs and their impact. Scientometric research indicates that the NRF rating system has had a positive impact on the publication profile of South Africa's researches in the social sciences.*

26. *The Department of Science and Technology introduced life sciences and health as well as global change as two of the five newly established Grand Challenges. The understanding of climate change is thus prioritised by the South African government and aims to establish two centres of excellence in this sector which will strengthen the research capacity significantly. With regards to the social sciences in general, as one of the Grand Challenges (Human and Social dynamics) the government aims to be recognised as a "knowledge hub" in social sciences research in Africa. It is therefore clear that the government has taken many steps to support research in the social sciences, but also with reference to climate change, in South Africa.*

Human Capital Pool

27. *South Africa has a growing pool of human resources in the social sciences. The humanities and social sciences research community has consistently constituted about 50% of the total number of academics at the 23 South African universities (social sciences and humanities). In addition there are more than 500 researchers employed by the HSRC and in government-based research programmes and non-government organisations.*



28. *As far as the production of high-level graduates is concerned, a review of the number of doctoral graduates produced over the past 17 years clearly shows that the broad domain of the Social Sciences and Humanities is well represented. The proportion of doctorates in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Business and Management Sciences and Education taken together constituted 48% of the total graduate production in the country in 2012. This is slightly down from the comparable proportion of 55% in 1996, but still shows that significant high-level skills in these fields are produced annually.*

Knowledge infrastructure

29. *The Department for Higher Education and Training (DHET) accredits South African journals which, if published in an accredited journal, produce a research subsidy to the university and department in question. The DHET has 263 accredited journals in 2014 of which approximately 165 are journals in the Social Sciences, Humanities and Business and*

Management sciences. This reaffirms South Africa's capacity for conducting research in the social sciences.

30. *An autonomous research environment was identified as an enabler of social sciences research in South Africa by respondents from the web-survey. From the results it is discernible that researchers experience relative freedom and autonomy in pursuing their own research interests with support from their respective institutions.*

Funding

31. *Evidence from national figures on R&D expenditure would suggest that the social sciences are much better off in 2012 than ten years ago as far as the availability of funding is concerned.*

32. *As far as funding for research is concerned the DHET system for awarding subsidies to publications in DHET accredited journals have also been reviewed and have been modified to award greater subsidies to books and book chapters which invariably advantages the social sciences. This is due to the fact that social sciences research lends itself better to the writing of and contributing to books.*

Barriers to conducting research in the social sciences

33. *One of the aims of the surveys and interviews was to identify the opinions of researchers in South Africa on the state – strengths and weaknesses – of the social sciences in South Africa. The results of the survey indicate that the majority of respondents are of the opinion that the state of social sciences in South Africa is unsatisfactory.*

34. *Further disaggregation of the survey results revealed that the most frequently mentioned reasons given for the unsatisfactory state of the social sciences in South Africa is (1) a lack of funding and (2) lack of PhD holders in the social sciences. The results from the qualitative interviews echo these findings but also identify other factors. The most frequently identified challenges in the qualitative data refer to a narrowness of intellectual culture, problems associated with doing interdisciplinary work as well as the manner in which the social sciences are esteemed both by the National Science System and the Government, Funding agencies and even universities in their approach towards supporting the social sciences.*

Insufficient funding

35. *A majority of social scientists in the country do not think that government funding of research in the social sciences is adequate. Inspecting the qualitative responses shows that many respondents feel that the national funding agencies are short-sighted in providing funding for the social sciences. Very often funding agencies don't grasp the financial implications for doing social sciences research in comparison to research in the natural/physical sciences.*

36. *The qualitative responses indicate that social scientists are very clear that there are not sufficient funding for specific categories of research and capacity-building: (1)There is insufficient funding for basic and fundamental social inquiry; (2)There is insufficient funding for large and accumulative research programmes in the social sciences, particularly setting up of big databases (survey research); (3)There is insufficient funding for inter- and trans-disciplinary research in the social sciences; (4)There is also insufficient funding for full-time doctoral students; (4)There is also insufficient funding for research methodology and theory capacity-building.*

A stagnant intellectual culture

37. *The social sciences in South Africa are also described as being incestuous and therefore becoming stagnant in its theoretical applications. Some respondents would typically refer – somewhat nostalgically – to the 1980s when a more robust and critical traditional in social science inquiry was more prevalent. This becomes clearer when one looks at the state of the disciplines within the social sciences. Many respondents argued that South Africa's political history of isolation negatively impacted the evolution of the various academic disciplines.*

Methodological challenges

38. *Methodological debates continue to prevail in disciplines such as political science, sociology and psychology. Robust quantitative methodology is often associated with the 'developed' world and has therefore (according to respondents) not established itself in South African disciplines. Many disciplines are also in discord with regards to the underlying principles of the methodological approaches. The almost negative connotation given to the positivist approach stems from the 1980s during which mainly quantitative methodology was deemed lacking. Often these two paradigms are seen as contradictory whereas few respondents lamented the need for a complementary approach to solve the pressing needs of South Africa. Although qualitative research in South Africa is often perceived to be a better approach towards data collection, some respondents felt that qualitative methodologists lack technical skills. Not surprisingly some respondents indicated that they believe that there is a "need for more advanced research methodological approaches in the social sciences e.g. modelling and better quality qualitative research." Particularly within the field of climate change, participants working within this field mentioned that the delineations of the field are unclear with very few academic institutions supporting its relevance.*

> *"I … think that the social sciences have struggled a little bit more to integrate back into the global academic arena so I think a lot of the Social Sciences have fallen quite far behind where their disciplines have gone. So for example if you look at political science and economics … the nature of the discipline has changed internationally and I think South African political science and economics, and I may even argue sociology, are still caught up in the type of thinking of the 1970s and early 1980s so I think they are slowly catching up, but relative to what happened in the natural sciences I think the gap between South African social sciences and what's happening internationally, I think, is quite large."*

Modes of knowledge production

39. *A number of interviewees expressed the view that the social sciences in South Africa are increasingly applied. As a result, the critique is that such research is not theoretically rich and also not accumulative – there are not sufficiently strong traditions of basic research in the country that make a contribution to the body of social sciences knowledge. The imperatives of practice or the policy domain are dominant rather than the theoretical imperatives of a discipline.*

> *"… our research is always applied, it is seldom entirely theoretical and I think someone within Sociology or even in philosophy or in history for instance say that there is insufficient support for those disciplines, purely theoretical disciplines, and I agree that every society needs that kind of research and enquiry as well…"*

40. *Our study has shown that there is a strong tension between the demands of the discipline and theory on the one hand and the demands of government, the work place and civil society. This is a restatement of the classic tension between fundamental inquiry that seeks knowledge for the sake of knowledge and applied or Mode 2 research that pursues relevance and social impact. And this tension – according to our interviewees – will not be resolved by the current practice of funding small and fragmented projects. As is the case of the natural*

sciences, we need large projects and programmes where knowledge is accumulated over time.

The imperative of inter- and trans-disciplinary research

41. *Respondents (both of the web-surveys and interviews) were targeted who worked on the intersection between the social sciences and climate/environment and health. Those involved in inter-disciplinary research primarily identified methodological and ideological challenges to doing trans- disciplinary research. This is particularly the case between those working in the social sciences and medical sciences. Many feel that these differences are irreconcilable but argue that such collaboration is extremely useful, although somewhat difficult.*

42. *Many respondents highlighted the fact that those working within the social sciences are hesitant to do inter-disciplinary research and are 'married' to their disciplines. For some this was due to the structures of South Africa universities.*

43. *A primary concern for those doing, or wanting to do, inter-disciplinary research, is the structure of funding agencies (NRF) in providing funding for this type of research, rewarding of outputs and also finding relevant journals to publish in. Many feel that the structures of the NRF hinder working across disciplines.*

Existing partnerships and collaborative efforts

44. *A primary objective of the study was to identify which partnerships and collaborative agreements exist between specifically the research centres, but also individual researchers based at universities. We were particularly interested in partnerships existing between South African centres and their continental counterparts as well as those centres working with institutions etc. in the United Kingdom. The majority of research centres indicated that they collaborate with Government departments in South Africa (86; n=103); Universities in South Africa (83; n=103); and Universities in sub-Saharan Africa (83; n=103). Only 10,5% of research centres currently collaborate with government departments in the United Kingdom.*

45. *As far as regional research focus is concerned, the focus of research centres was evenly distributed between South Africa, SADC, the African continent and other developing countries. Almost all of the individual respondents (91%) were interested in research topics relevant to South Africa while only 3,3% listed research topics relevant to SADC. It is clear from the results that individual researchers either preferred working on topics related to South Africa, or had more access to topics of this nature. Given the fact that South Africa can be considered a middle-income country, one can assume that many topics relating to South Africa (by individual researchers) can be either compared or repeated in other countries with similar problems.*

46. *When considering the qualitative data, the majority of respondents did not feel that South African researchers are necessarily obliged to collaborate with their African counterparts, but rather felt that such collaborative efforts are very useful and could benefit all parties tremendously. Many did feel however that collaboration is very time-consuming and costly and that there needs to be systems or agencies in place that would support such partnerships. It was also highlighted that collaborative efforts should be reciprocal if both parties were to benefit optimally.*

47. *Our bibliometric analyses showed that international collaboration in the social sciences is on the increase (from 14% of all social sciences articles in 1993-1997 to 32% in 2008-2012).*

However, collaboration is most prominent in the health subfield (56% in 2008-2012). The sub-field of climate change also involves a strong degree of international co-authorship (47% of all articles in the domain in 2008-2012). The USA and the UK account for the largest shares of co-authored articles in these two sub-fields (USA: 54% in health in 2008-2012; UK: 25% in health in 2008-2012).

48. *Collaboration between South Africa and other sub-Saharan African countries in the social sciences is still very low (only 5% in 2008-2012). The figures seem "more promising" in the case of health and climate change where it is at least 10%. However, these collaborations are not necessarily because of direct relationships between South African scientists and their sub-Saharan African counterparts. It is most likely the case of different sub-Saharan partners being taken on board the research teams of foreign scientists.*

Conclusions and Recommendations

49. *Our mapping of centres and institutes in the broad field of the social sciences and evaluation (including centres that work on the interface between social sciences and health and social sciences and climate research) has revealed an extensive and robust capacity in many subfields. This capacity is predominantly located in the universities and HSRC with some capacity (especially in evaluation studies) in civil society. The capacity is strongest in traditional and general social science fields but less strong in evaluation research and the inter-disciplinary domain of social science and climate/environment studies.*

Recommendation 1: We recommend that attention be given to initiatives and programmes that would strengthen and expand the capacity of South African social scientists working in the field of social science and climate studies as well as specifically strengthening the basic capability to undertake evaluation studies.

50. *The study has unequivocally found that funding (or the lack thereof) is cited by most social scientists as the biggest barrier to conducting research. This sentiment was re-affirmed in various components of our study despite the fact that there has been – at the national level – a steady increase in the proportional funding of the social sciences in the country over the past ten years. Further investigation has shown that social scientists are specifically concerned about the lack of funding for specific kinds of social science research.*

Recommendation 2: Not only is there is need to continue increasing the funding for social science in South Africa, there is also a specific need to focus funding in some high-priority areas such as funding to support (1) more inter-disciplinary research; (2) more basic and theoretical research and (3) large social science projects.

51. *An important finding of the study is a concern for quality doctoral training and funding for full-time PhD students. Despite the fact that doctoral graduates in the social sciences and humanities are well represented, our results indicated that more doctoral students are needed to address the dwindling numbers of experienced researchers, especially at universities in South Africa.*

Recommendation 3: It is crucial, if South Africa's vibrant research capacity be sustained, that funding for doctoral training in South Africa be prioritised. There is a significant need for funding of full-time doctoral students and incentives (1) to attract more doctoral students and (2) to subsequently retain doctoral graduates in the research sector.

52. *The study found that collaboration between South Africa and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, in terms of social sciences research, is still very poor. However, marginally higher figures are associated with health and climate research. Collaboration between South Africa and the UK, in terms of social sciences research, is more established than collaboration between South Africa and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Indications are that collaboration between South Africa and its regional counterparts is growing because of the involvement of internationally based (and also UK-based) research teams. An important observation produced by the study is that many social sciences researchers in South Africa view collaboration to be time-consuming and costly and often one-sided.*

Recommendation 4: It is a recommendation of this study that more attention be paid to setting up systems and agencies that would support collaboration, specifically in sub-Saharan Africa, but also with other low income countries worldwide. It is important that these systems address and support reciprocity between partners and facilitate where possible barriers could occur (i.e. language issues etc.).

53. *This report presented a brief glimpse into the on-going debate on the state of social sciences in South Africa. This study reported that although 40 per cent of the overall student population is Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) students (2010) there is an imbalance in the tertiary education system with regards to the HSS. Although funding for and graduate numbers in the Humanities and the Social Sciences has been on a steady increase, the study presented many individual researchers' opinion that the state of social sciences in South Africa is unsatisfactory and undervalued.*

Recommendation 5: It is our recommendation that governing bodies such as the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and ASSAf continue their efforts to strengthen the social sciences and humanities in South Africa whilst considering the establishment of the proposed academy/institute/entity of humanities and social sciences. It is imperative that the South African government and the tertiary education system support the humanities and social sciences in South Africa if the thriving research capacity be continued.

54. *Although some considerable challenges to doing social science research in South Africa have been reported in this study, we have also witnessed the growing internationalisation of South African social sciences over the past ten years. The isolationism of the apartheid era has been overcome and new collaborative relations and networks have been forged. Policies and frameworks supporting the social sciences, particularly with reference to the social sciences and environmental targets being included the South African Government's articulation of the Grand Challenges, have proven successful but still require sustained attention and effort. The South African research landscape also boasts a growing pool of human resources and an autonomous research environment.*

Recommendation 6: It is our recommendation that these accomplishments and enablers of social sciences research in South Africa be publicly acknowledged and celebrated to ensure that future initiatives to strengthen social sciences research build on that which has yielded results and proven successful.