Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon Europe
A call for true integration of SSH expertise

European societies are facing big challenges: addressing climate change, enhancing inclusive well-being and creating a post-Covid-19 society. These challenges require a joint effort across all research fields. Integration of SSH (social sciences, law, economics, and humanities) expertise is vital in tackling these big challenges. Therefore, SSH expertise should be given prominence in the development of Horizon Europe, the new European framework program.

Why SSH expertise matters

It has become increasingly clear that even biomedical or 'technological' challenges cannot be solved by technological or biomedical sciences alone. The bottlenecks are social, institutional, psychological and legal. The three main challenges confronting European societies today clearly show why SSH expertise matters.

1. Climate change
Faced by an impending climate crisis, contemporary societies are preparing an energy transition. In addition to knowledge on the development, transportation and storage of green energy, we need to consider rebuilding entire city sections and living spaces, developing new start-up and corporatist business models, developing efficient regulation, eliciting citizen engagement, devising fair user systems, and – most importantly – changing human behavior. All of these challenges are essentially SSH challenges, and most of them require close collaboration within SSH disciplines and between SSH and technological sciences.

2. Inclusive well-being
It is becoming increasingly clear that the prosperity of European societies is not solely determined by technology, but also by institutions, social foundations, education, and cooperation between stakeholders. Moreover, economic growth and technological innovation do not automatically translate into inclusive well-being. It is ever more acknowledged that well-being is not only determined by material circumstances, but also depends on non-material qualities of societies: culture, religion, social ties, trust, security...

We need to go beyond GDP as the dominant economic target and move towards more robust and meaningful broader welfare indicators. This implies we have to rethink the role of markets, institutions and civil society in order to overcome the apparent trade-off between economic growth on the one hand and an inclusive, resilient and sustainable society on the other. Doing so is a big challenge, which requires us to think about policies, legislation, regulation, systems and high-quality institutions. Not doing so, and allowing well-being to decline, may lead to public anxiety, aversion, distrust. SSH expertise can offer the knowledge and the instruments that can serve as a foundation for political decision-making and effective policy choices.

3. Post-Covid-19 society

The worldwide Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the importance of SSH knowledge. We are faced with more than a public health crisis: the pandemic has broadened existing divides in our societies. The challenge is not just to recoup the enormous economic costs involved, but rather to change human behavior and to make it more compatible with a changed reality. All of this requires SSH expertise. The crisis has shown that the combination of medical and SSH expertise or technological and SSH expertise is crucial. 'Healthy' behavior is a key component to unlocking societies. So is technological design that adheres to fundamental human rights principles.

In order to safeguard the well-being of all European citizens, SSH expertise, and the reciprocal integration of SSH expertise and biomedical and technical sciences, are vital. SSH expertise should not merely be thought of an addition to biomedical or technological research, but should be fully integrated from start to end, in order to safeguard societal impact.

Towards a recognition of SSH

Over the past years, the importance of SSH expertise in dealing with the big challenges of European societies has been recognized. SSH is ready to further proceed along these lines and to contribute actively to addressing these challenges. We aim to do so not in isolation but by collaborating in interdisciplinary teams, tackling issues of direct societal relevance and effectively enhancing the societal impact generated by these teams.

At the same time, we know that such an integrated approach requires clear direction. Ideas and intentions are not sufficient. The incentive structure needs to reflect the importance of SSH expertise. This implies clear and binding directives within the framework conditions of interdisciplinary co-operation.

In order to facilitate this positive and necessary development, the practical organization of the new European framework program, Horizon Europe, needs to be revised. SSH experts need to be involved in the very framing and concrete drafting of the calls, in developing the process and guidelines for constituting consortiums (where the SSH integration should be binding), and in designing evaluation procedures and the selection and composition of evaluating panels.

Taking the next step

The big challenges we face have far-reaching SSH components. SSH experts need to be included in designing ways to address them. We, as SSH, are ready to help make European research take the next step in achieving societal relevance.

We request that the following actions are taken:

1. Labelling two grand challenges to be led by SSH: 'well-being' and 'inclusion'.

2. Increasing the share of funding for SSH and maximizing the instruments to encourage SSH-medical and SSH-tech research.

3. Create 10 European hubs, with SSH directorship, as centers of excellence to tackle societal challenges in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.