

## **Speech to ICSU General Assembly**

**Dr. Olive Shisana (President of the ISSC)**

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**President of ICSU, Prof. Y.T. Lee, Executive Director of ISSC, ladies and gentlemen.**

In the 'Big Conversation' held at London City Hall recently and organized by Radio 1, youth were asked what they thought motivated the 'high-end' rioting that saw youth in the UK plunder Brand shops for high-end commodities such as Levi jeans, electronic equipment and 'heavenly sweets' to round off the escapade. One of the findings of this conversation was the disjuncture between the expectations of the youth and their real job opportunities – or lack of them. It is not enough to be a hard-working, salaried citizen: for many young people, the ends of the continuum, from Barack Obama to Lady Gaga, represent, respectively, global fame and billionaire lifestyles that make up their aspirations.

When the reality of jobless misery sets in, however, as it does for so many, one kind of response is the wave of social unrest that has touched both the North and South of the Mediterranean in the last year, ranging from young unemployed and debt-laden commerce students in Greece, to the millions of poorly skilled and jobless in North Africa. The London rioters took things a step further in August this year, as one BBC interview displayed in the words of two young girl-rioters from Croydon:

...That's what it's all about, showing the police we can do what we want. And now we have. It's the rich people, the people who've got businesses, and that's why all of this is happening. It's showing the rich people we can do what we want ([www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424))

In 1903, one of the German founding fathers of sociology, Georg Simmel (1858 - 1918), characterized the 'mental mind of the metropolis' as overburdened. The speed of life inspired with technology, he said (just over a century ago), was producing a sensory overstimulation that impoverished intellectual reflection and enquiry, providing a wider knowledge of the world, but one that was fast losing its depth of perception and experience. What would George Simmel say today if he saw our frenetic pace of life, multi-tasking with ipads, blackberries, internet and facebook, even while we try to reflect on humanity's challenges in our conferences? And while we burn our bodies up in this way, we also burn up our planet's resources in the cauldrons of our relentless activity. But when our youth begin to question our mode of existence with their own burning tactics, we need to once more revisit the selection and priorities presented in our big questions and grand challenges.

To this end, I would like to pose two challenges with major political and socio-economic consequences:

1. The first is the 'rise of the young'

In emerging cities there is a youth 'bulge': populations are shifting in the Global South towards a younger generation. In Africa, the HIV-AIDs epidemic has reduced life expectancy and robbed many in this generation of its elders and mentors. In some countries now, life expectancy is as low as 37 years. As the global economy contracts, jobs become an elite expectation rather than a norm for a young person. What are the consequences for global governance of this youth 'bulge'? Will it produce the caliber of leaders that the world will require? Can we anticipate or model the kind of world government we are going to have if this younger generation begins to assert its place in world leadership? Electoral patterns in many countries already demonstrate increased participation of young people.

2. The epistemic challenge of a 'paper-less' world

The digital revolution is breaking down the power of the written text. Even text as the dominant code for communication has been disrupted by the growing power

of the visual in fast capitalism today (Serageldin, 2011). Modes of life are therefore transforming faster than the generations of older scientists can keep pace with. Modes of scientific enquiry, however, still reflect the centuries-old paradigms for gathering and presenting data. The continuum represented by positivism, on the one hand, and post-modernism, on the other, counter-poses the description of facts to multiple realities and subjective experience.

To interrogate the 'youth bulge' or the 'paper-less' future, we could marshal the naturalist emphasis on 'law-like causal regularities' within social phenomena, for example, drawing on demographers and science and technology experts to outline the shape of this phenomenon: how many youth; in what parts of the world this phenomenon is observable; linguistic experts to demonstrate new forms of communication and the codifying of such communication.

But we could also draw on the strengths of interpretive social enquiry to understand the semiotics of visual images, with cultural anthropologists conversing with philosophers and sociologists to make the connections between symbolic meanings that different kinds of youth attach to social events and phenomena, and the evidence of social and political violence and disaffection. Walking between different ends of the positivist and subjectivist continuum in social enquiry could have two outcomes: the one may be a conflictual effort to rank the validity of these different kinds of enquiry according to where one's sympathies lie – with either the naturalists or the critical theorists. A more productive outcome would be to find a systematic way of methodologically relating one epistemological approach to another.

I don't believe we have explored knowledge production sufficiently to find a middle ground between these two extremes, while still holding onto the integrity of disciplinary lenses. In advancing collaboration between ICSU and the ISSC, we need to invent the paradigms that will allow us to explain phenomena so that we go both deep and wide. In coming together in this way, the product we generate has more profound possibilities and consequences. If the youth 'bulge' presented earlier is becoming a 'paper-less' youth, then our modes of enquiry and presentation need to reflect these shifting realities.

We in the ISSC would therefore like to take the opportunity of this General Assembly, to keep reasserting that our global challenges require integrated responses. Solving these and other big questions of our time require systematic collaboration between the social and the natural sciences for their answers. If we are, indeed, to move forward in our epistemic and policy endeavours, we need *an active conversation – and joint agenda-setting* - between the different branches and schools of scientific investigation.

One of our mutual achievements is the agreement that the two international bodies – ICSU and ISSC - would collaborate. This agreement was a bold initiative that was consolidated at the 2008 GAs of both organizations. At these general assemblies, resolutions were passed in October and November, respectively, in which both organizations committed to a meaningful partnership.

Our **collaborative efforts** to date include:

1. The *launching of the IRDR* (Integrated Research on Disaster Risk) program.

The efforts of ICSU and the ISSC to tackle thematic areas and social problems together are part of the integrated methodological endeavour.

The UN international Strategies for Disaster Reduction appointed an Executive Director of the New Integrated Research on Disaster Risk programme. This is a project that allows for the use of the talents of natural, social, biomedical and engineering scientists, all coming together to improve our understanding of natural and human-induced environmental hazards, the extent to which humans are at risk, and evidenced-informed mitigation strategies.

2. Cooperation between ICSU and ISSC was strengthened when we joined the Belmont Forum to initiate a ten-year Earth System Research for

Global Sustainability initiative. This is a fantastic example of the natural and social sciences, designing from the very start, a new global initiative.

3. Together with ICSU and other key partners – the German National Committee on Global Change Research (NKGCF) and Earth System Science Partnership (ESSP) – we are planning a *joint conference on “Integrated Global Change Research”*.

Such agreements that harness the multidisciplinary skills of scientists and rapidly generate knowledge are necessary to find solutions to major global challenges that threaten human lives. This collaboration has been growing on a bilateral or trilateral basis, such as the framework agreement which calls for the secondment of a Director of International Affairs at DFG to work with both ICSU and the ISSC on the theme of global environmental change.

As global scientists, not only do we need to collaborate on actual research, but also to determine – together - which research questions and problems are our priorities. *FRAMING, DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING RESEARCH PROGRAMS AND EVENTS TOGETHER is what will not replace, but complement, existing modes of scientific investigation.*

In the ISSC at present, our **priority programs** are framed within a broader theme of Global Environmental Change, and we hope that this collaboration will help to direct the way our programmes unfold:

## **1. WORLD SOCIAL SCIENCE FORUMS**

The 2009 Forum was in Bergen with the title: *One Planet, Worlds Apart*. We endeavor to address substantive topics of world significance, as well as future priorities of international social science. I am especially proud to announce that WSSF 2015 will take place in the beautiful city of Durban, South Africa and be hosted by South Africa's Human Science Research Council, the HSRC.

## **2. WORLD SOCIAL SCIENCE REPORT**

The title for the most recent report is 'Knowledge Divides'. Eighty articles are published in this report by a wide geographic and cross-disciplinary spread of authors. The report identifies numerous divides which limit the accumulation, transmission and use of knowledge. We also highlight in this report the striking inequalities that persist across regions, across countries and within countries in the volume, nature and quality of social science research conducted.

The ISSC is therefore dedicated to, amongst other efforts: (i) Support regional networks as well as diasporic ones to promote the circulation of ideas. (ii) Encourage inter- and transdisciplinary research and collaboration; analyze and address the various obstacles.

## **3. WORLD SOCIAL SCIENCE FELLOWS AND SCHOLARS PROGRAM**

This four-year programme has been funded by SIDA – Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency and is designed to strengthen the research and teaching capacities of future generations of global social science leaders from all parts of the world, early career social scientists will participate in a range of seminars focusing on new or emerging fields of study.

## **4. GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE Initiative**

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) has commissioned the ISSC to lead an 18-month project aimed at developing a proposal for a 10-year global climate change research funding and coordination initiative for the social sciences. This project, and the initiative that it intends to design, are a response to the

increased demand for social sciences research on climate change, and the lack of adequate research funding at the global level to meet that demand. The ISSC is initiating an international consultation with its partners and members, and very much hopes to involve your Association in this dialogue.

In conclusion, we face institutional structures and practices that are not always geared to integration. Daily institutional realities confronted by scientists often don't make integration a feasible reality. Reward cycles and career trajectories sometimes suffer the constraints of the 'silo' effect, entailing highly individualized performance appraisal mechanisms. As scientists we need to appreciate relevant new findings in other disciplines and be a part of the cross-fertilisation of knowledge that is crucial to addressing priority global problems. Setting up joint international programs where, **from the start**, the issues to be addressed are jointly framed by our scientific communities, is critical.

The funding environment for research is challenging in new ways: many donors prefer larger projects and less fragmentation in the institutional landscape. Projects that are able to demonstrate both cross- and inter-disciplinarity, thereby allowing more over-arching policy strategies, will thrive in this global environment. Our goal is to ensure that, in our work with ICSU, we are building our own capacity to be a stronger partner in our integration endeavors. We wish you the best in your deliberations for your General Assembly.