

Blurring disciplinary boundaries

The ambitious and integrated framework of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demonstrates that complex global problems span the natural and social sciences and that solutions to such problems demand a joint approach of the two. Despite decades of efforts toward better integration, much of society still presumes a stark divide between the disciplines, and most scientists continue to be trained, evaluated, and rewarded in disciplinary silos. The recent merger of the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the International Social Science Council (ISSC)—leading international councils of the natural and social sciences, respectively—sends a powerful message that the future of science depends on collapsing the walls between academic disciplines.

The new International Science Council, freshly minted by an overwhelming vote at a meeting of both ISSC and ICSU in October, will bring together the resources, networks, and intellectual communities of the combined membership of ISSC and ICSU, making it one of the world's largest science organizations. Its membership brings together more than 40 international scientific unions and associations and more than 140 national and regional organizations, including celebrated “learned societies” such as the U.S. National Academy of Sciences and major research agencies such as the National Research Foundation of South Africa.

Despite undeniable successes in establishing international research initiatives in the past, both independently and together, the ISSC and ICSU have not achieved substantial recognition beyond their immediate scientific communities. Future success as the new council will depend on increased credibility, legitimacy, and convening power of its leadership. Under a governing board and a single president, to be elected in July 2018, the council will develop an impact-oriented agenda focusing on science for policy and policy for science, aimed at enabling international research coor-

dination to contribute more effectively to major issues in the international public domain. Establishing and strengthening partnerships will be a priority, reaching beyond academia into policy, civil society, and business. Strengthened regional strategies will contribute to cultivating its authority, and focused priority agendas at annual international science summits will aim to engage membership and increase the council's impact.



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Among its priorities, the council will address the major “wicked” problems spanning the natural and social sciences and beyond. Efforts initiated by ICSU and ISSC on challenges such as disaster risk reduction and sustainability indicate the kinds of initiatives that the new council will seek to develop more effectively. These Integrated Research on Disaster Risk and Future Earth programs, cosponsored with other international scientific organizations, bring together natural and social scientists, as well as societal stakeholders, in research projects that are highly relevant in making progress toward the SDGs.

The new International Science Council will provide a new institutional context for the long-called-for convergence to become a reality, a turning point for all who have struggled to move beyond the historic divide between the study of the natural world and of human societies and behaviors. It will provide global science with a voice of authority and influence on issues of major concern to science and societies, to speak alongside those of governments (via UN agencies) and funders (including the Global Research Council). This merger should help foster meaningful interdisciplinarity that begins with the joint framing of problems; ensure that all disciplines are exploiting opportunities of the digital revolution, including for data integration; and unify scientific communities. It will be guided in its actions by the shared vision of advancing all sciences as a global public good and by the need to defend freedom and responsibility in the conduct of science.

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