

**DRAFT HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH COUNCIL (HSRC) BILL**  
**DISCUSSION DOCUMENT**

The Act establishing the HSRC was passed in 1968, and has been only slightly amended since. Accordingly, when an Institutional Review of the HSRC was conducted in October 2003 by a panel of local and international experts, the Report recommended a set of five 'public purposes' by which the mandate of the HSRC might be expressed and justified. The Report also recommended a possible Preamble for the new Act.

Drawing heavily on these recommendations, a draft bill for a new HSRC Act has been provided by the Department of Science and Technology, for comment by HSRC stakeholders, staff and the public. Much of the draft bill deals with technical matters relating to the composition of the Council, the governance and finance of the HSRC, and so on. This document focuses instead on the principles upon which the bill is based, which are outlined in the Preamble and in section 3 (Object of Council); and especially in section 4 (Functions, powers and duties of Council), where the proposed 'public purposes' of the HSRC are listed. These are:

- a. To foster and undertake fundamental and applied social science, from data gathering through information provision to analysis, relevant to the development challenges faced by South Africa, especially by means of projects linked into large scale, public sector oriented, collaborative programmes;
- b. To contribute to the effective making, implementing and monitoring of policy and to informing public debate through the effective dissemination of the results of research;
- c. To help build the capacity of the social science system and its members, as well as fostering their activity in collaborations, networks and institutional linkages;
- d. To respond to the needs of research and analysis on development problems identified by such groups in society whose organisations on their own do not have the capacity to undertake or access such enquiries;

- e. To develop and make publicly available new data sets to underpin research, policy development and public discussion of the key issues of development and to develop new and improved methodologies for use in their production.

The document touches on each of these themes below. Its aim is to raise some broad considerations that may occasion relevant discussion. The main comments received from the public, HSRC staff, and a seminar of stakeholders will be synthesised, as far as possible, into a set of suggested changes or additions to the bill. The Council of the HSRC will consider these, and recommend a version of the bill to the Minister and Department of Science and Technology.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

The HSRC straddles the complex and fruitful territory between social-scientific inquiry and social policy; theory and practice; academia and government. Its research must meet criteria defined by utility and service, but must also be scientifically rigorous and of high quality, not least because it is often taken into public policy and programme implementation.

In the past, the HSRC was a key institution in helping to define and drive apartheid social engineering. Its agenda was largely shaped and its findings frequently applied in elaborating and carrying out the racial programmes of the minority government of the day. Today, the organisation serves a democratic government guided by a rights-based Constitution. Its prime task is to contribute to far-reaching socio-economic transformation, and to the tackling of the development challenges of the country and the continent, through policy-relevant and largely applied social-scientific research. On this basis, it is expected to undertake a positive, independent, and – where necessary – critical engagement with a very different South African tradition that does not demand slavish adherence to ideology, and is therefore, at its best, willing to follow through the logic of well-presented and convincing research. This opening out of the HSRC involves other elements, notably an increasing research engagement with academia, business, labour and civil society, and with the rest of the continent and the world.

On one level, this opening out is evident in the marked diversification of the organisation's sources of funding. However the HSRC is also reacting to and is part of increasingly sophisticated and diverse post-apartheid South Africa and the complex, ambiguous, but also unavoidable forces of globalisation that challenge South Africa's integrity and prosperity, while also providing opportunities that a modern knowledge-based society can grasp and utilise to the incalculable benefit of its citizens. The HSRC of today has sloughed off its non-research functions, and now consists of highly qualified and experienced social research professionals and support staff, with skills across a wide range of disciplines, capable of utilising research methodologies up to and including large-scale social surveys.

The HSRC is described in detail in its Annual Report, available on its website: [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za). The following sketch gives some attributes that are relevant to the discussion below. In the past five years the HSRC has grown from fifty to one hundred and fifty researchers, in ten inter-disciplinary, problem-oriented programmes that span the social-research needs of most government departments at all levels. In addition to project reports for users, researchers publish in academic journals at the same rate as good South African universities. The HSRC's parliamentary grant now comprises forty percent of its expenditure of some R240m, with the remainder being earned from tenders, commissions, and grants from local and international foundations and development agencies. Two-thirds of its projects involve collaborators from other research entities, especially higher-education institutions. Among the two hundred and fifty projects that may be under way at any time, the largest fifteen accounts for more than half of the research earnings. There are project sites or partnerships in thirty other African countries. The organisation is majority-black for the first time in its history, among both researchers and support staff. To continue the improvement in representivity, especially at senior levels, there is a large internship programme for forty masters and doctoral students.

## **2. LARGE-SCALE DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH**

South Africa grapples with many development challenges. The millions suffering from unemployment, illness, and inadequate nutrition, housing and education demand reasonable material welfare and a dignified way of life. Research into such problems can take many forms; can be at different levels from the gathering of data to sophisticated

analysis and interpretation; can involve different stages in the social research process, from background understanding through planning to monitoring of implementation and evaluation of impact; and can involve various methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, historical, case-study, often applied in concert by researchers in multi-disciplinary teams. A requirement that is often crucial is to be able to respond to the needs of government for large-scale research, mobilising substantial resources and sometimes involving numerous researchers from several institutions in different countries over several years.

The HSRC has developed and is recognised for its expertise and experience in such research, and was recognised by the Institutional Review as being in a good position in the country, and region, to organise consortia for such purposes around this core. This is captured in the draft bill when it declares that the HSRC should **‘foster and undertake fundamental and applied social science ... relevant to the development challenges faced by South Africa, especially by means of projects linked into large scale, public sector oriented, collaborative programmes’**.

An area open to debate however is the precise balance in the HSRC’s project mix. Must the centrality of large-scale research necessarily divert attention or resources from medium-and smaller-scale, but still important, research projects that also serve a significant developmental purpose; that are requested from the organisation by its users, often when a quick turnaround is required; that are opportunities to diversify the range of collaborators; and that are especially suitable for research capacity-building among interns?

In any event, the HSRC undoubtedly conducts research as much as it fosters or coordinates it. These considerations imply that in section 3, under ‘Object of Council’, there might be more overt recognition in the draft bill of the HSRC’s central function of actually carrying out research - as indeed is specified and recognised in subsequent sections, i.e. 4(3)(a) and 4(4)(a).

### **3. POLICY, PUBLIC DEBATE, DISSEMINATION**

Links between public debate and policy in a modern democracy are complex. Discourse relating to policy takes place along a spectrum from sharp political contention to

technical feasibility. A crucial role of a science council, particularly one that has society itself as its area of expertise, is to provide a base of evidence and analysis for these debates among policy makers and extend the understanding and possibility for informed engagement by the public; and even to reflect on the processes of debate themselves. A science council such as the HSRC must be aware of and responsive to the political process, yet step aside from the political arena. It must be non-political but not apolitical, disinterested but not uninterested.

To make such a contribution to policy debate, a body like the HSRC must communicate with a range of audiences, from the popular to the technical. As well as background papers and reports for government, the informed contributions of the HSRC must appear in academic journals, in books, and in the press and on the Internet, informing and bearing upon public opinion and government policy. Different modes of dissemination are called for, such as seminars and community feedbacks, and different formats, such as film and radio as well as text.

Researchers from the HSRC do appear constantly in such forums, and through its publishing and communications divisions it facilitates a substantial and sustained contribution to such debates. This range of activities is mandated in the statement in the draft bill that the HSRC should **‘contribute to the effective making, implementing and monitoring of policy and to informing public debate through the effective dissemination of the results of research’**.

#### 4. BUILDING CAPACITY

The HSRC's relations with universities and other higher-education institutions (HEIs), fellow science councils, and researchers in NGOs, government departments and parastatals, have been and continue to be diverse and close. HSRC researchers have moved to and from these spheres, and there are many intellectual links and collaborative research projects uniting the organisation with colleagues in these organisations. They present work at the same conferences and publish in the same journals and books. This does not preclude some rivalry that was, in the past, compounded by the role of the HSRC as a structure of apartheid, and in the present by a perception that the HSRC may have trawled too deeply in the pool of available research talent.

In response, the HSRC has sought increasingly structured relations especially with HEIs, to take advantage of complementary opportunities for capacity building. The HSRC's masters and doctoral interns do their research on HSRC projects while registered at universities. Senior HSRC staff is encouraged (and paid) to retain or create part-time postgraduate teaching arrangements with HEIs, and junior staff can take advantage of a bursary scheme and considerable extra leave for study.

The Council is accordingly enjoined in one of its functions **'to help build the capacity of the social science system and its members, as well as fostering their activity in collaborations, networks and institutional linkages'**. And in the Preamble the draft act emphasises research collaboration, nationally and internationally.

#### 5. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

In recent years the HSRC has drastically increased the ratio of researchers to support staff, and the proportion of revenue that it derives from research earnings. However, the HSRC is not a consultancy, driven by commercial imperatives. These developments have been in the interests of economy and efficiency, to reduce bureaucracy and increase research capacity, thereby extending the breadth and depth of the research services that the HSRC can offer to its predominantly public-sector users. The organisation receives a Parliamentary grant, partly in support of its responsibility towards the mass of the South African population and its commitment to the needs of the poor and underprivileged and

their representative organisations in civil society. In financial terms research work of this type may not bring in substantial, or any, income. Such projects are supported from the HSRC's Parliamentary grant in whole or part. An example is the important current study of homelessness in South Africa, involving several of the research programmes of the organisation, and additional financial support from some donors.

This function is represented by the stipulation in the draft bill that the HSRC must **‘respond to the needs of research and analysis on development problems identified by such groups in society whose organisations on their own do not have the capacity to undertake or access such enquiries’**. An area for consideration is how the pressure on science councils to earn, if they are to grow to a viable size, may set up a tension with this responsibility. Is responding to such "market distortions" increasingly an "un(der)funded mandate"?

## **6. ACCESSING DATA; SHARING RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The draft bill suggests that it should be a function of the HSRC **‘to develop and make publicly available new data sets to underpin research, policy development and public discussion of the key issues of development and to develop new and improved methodologies for use in their production’**.

The HSRC, as noted above, is deeply involved in development-oriented research. In this it collaborates with other organisations, actively disseminating information, sharing analysis and alerting the research community to innovative methodologies. The HSRC subscribes to freedom of information, and, as a publicly funded body, expects to make its data sets available to the public and other researchers, after sufficient time for its own processing and analysis, and with due respect for the anonymity of respondents. However, an organisation expected to support itself increasingly through research earnings must have first call on the results of that research.

It could be argued that the clause as currently formulated over-emphasises data-dissemination as a function of the HSRC, by contrast with other organisations whose prime mandate it undoubtedly is. The HSRC is a research council, and – although in the course of its problem-oriented research it does gather data in sets of various kinds and

sizes – its primary role is not, for instance, that of Statistics South Africa, which provides statistical information for research and analysis to the private sector, governmental and other entities (including the HSRC); or that of the SA Data Archive of the National Research Foundation.

## **7. THE HSRC, AFRICA AND THE WORLD**

An important aspect of the draft bill is the importance assigned to the HSRC in the context of the world and particularly Africa. The Preamble emphasises the obligation of the South African social science community to engage with colleagues elsewhere on the continent **‘on pressing social issues relevant to human welfare and prosperity’**. However it also recognises the crucial impact of globalisation in the contemporary world. The formulation suggests an appropriate approach to contemporary South African social science research.

## **8. INDEPENDENCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Two somewhat related respects in which the draft bill is not yet explicit concern (i) the delicate balance which the HSRC, as one among the necessarily hybrid statutory science councils, is expected to maintain between accountability and autonomy in the establishing of its work programmes; and (ii) the preservation of the necessary independence from political pressures or user demands in the conduct of its scientific investigations.

If one considers first the setting of their research agendas, science councils are less autonomous and more accountable than universities: government constitutes, and partly funds, them in order that they will be especially responsive to, and available to meet the needs of, the public sector for public-benefit research. On the other hand, science councils – if they are any good at their task – are more autonomous, and less accountable, than the research sections within government departments, or private sector consultancies. Equipped by their specialities, in touch with developments elsewhere, in interaction with colleagues using other approaches, their researchers should be able occasionally to peer over the horizon at what their users do not yet realise they will soon need to know, and undertake research accordingly. This is an important purpose of the

parliamentary grant, apart from meeting the research needs of marginalised communities referred to earlier. Also, the boards of science councils can play important roles here, in preserving the balance between accountability and autonomy; helping steer a path between, typically, the urgent demands for shorter-term, more responsive, urgent work and the important opportunities for longer-term, more reflective, work (though, in the case of science councils, of a kind that is still user-oriented, if less user-driven).

In the setting of the agenda, then, the research managers in a science council have a duty to welcome the active engagement of stakeholders: their political principals, users, funders, and even their public audience. But, the agenda having been established, these research managers then have a different duty: to resist external non-scientific interference from those same stakeholders, in order to protect the independence that is necessary for the rigorous conduct of good science. In this process, the key stakeholders are of course their scientific peers, whose literature they consult, whose methodologies they adapt and improve, with whom they discuss in teams, among whom they argue at seminars and conferences, to whom they submit their publications for peer review. However, especially in social science, where the subject matter – education, politics, employment, health, the family etc. – is also the substance of everyday life, some agenda-setters may be tempted to intrude on the scientific process; perhaps all the more if they are also directly responsible for funding it, as politicians or donors.

In practice, the distinctions are not so clear, nor unrelated. For example, for understandable reasons of accountability (e.g. the Minister needs numbers to win more budget), a researcher may resort to a methodology that is less than suitable, yet apply it impartially. Or, from the other side of the fence, a government user may feel that a researcher, who previously had a government role in his/her present area of research, could not be adequately independent; and may therefore seek to influence the composition of the research team. More positively, discussing draft results with a user, who is probably an expert in her field, may improve the researcher's interpretations or reveal extra areas for consideration.

The HSRC Act is likely to be the first in a cycle of Acts among the various science councils. A suitable guideline in these respects in the HSRC's statute, that the other

councils could adopt or adapt subsequently, might be a useful contribution to, simultaneously, the social relevance and the scientific rigour of the science system.

## **9. AFTERWORD**

There are points open to debate in the draft bill, and one or two that may need to be supplied. But the draft is firm on fundamentals, yet broad and enabling rather than prescriptive regarding implementation. Aided by the Constitution, and the insights of the Institutional Review, it incorporates guiding principles rather than proposing to shackle the HSRC with elaborate and inhibiting prescriptions. This should make it suitable to rapidly changing times and evolving needs.