

## Impact Outlook

- ‘The most important resources for social science research in the region are space and time’
- ‘For our aspirations to be realised there is a need for Arab organisations that extend support (financial, training, networking) to researchers, especially junior researchers at the beginning of their careers. It is for this purpose, primarily, that the ACSS was founded’

# The value of knowledge production

*Seteney Shami, Director-General of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, shares her thoughts on the Council's role as an emerging institution seeking to carve out its niche in the regional landscape of knowledge organisations and how they are working to support independent research in the region*

### Firstly, can you tell us what led to the Arab Council for Social Sciences (ACSS) being set up and what are the Council's current priorities?

In the Arab region, the social sciences are shaped by a context characterised by many socio-political, economic and environmental challenges, political instability as well as divergent research policies, agendas and funding programmes at national and regional levels. The Arab region is home to a respectable number of talented academics and students in the social sciences, but higher education and social science institutions tend to be weak, lacking in innovation and insufficiently linked to media and public policy institutions and thus limited in their ability to disseminate research and impact change. The social sciences also receive comparatively little funding, either from states or private sources, as compared to the applied and natural sciences. Most problematic is the state of the social sciences at universities in the region, where often the quality of teaching is very low and is worsening. There are new and exciting universities in the region but most of them do not include departments of social science, except possibly for economics.

Of course this institutional weakness is also related to the control that authoritarian regimes exercise on knowledge production and dissemination, limiting freedom of thought and setting boundaries in terms of acceptable and unacceptable areas for research and teaching, which leads to a great deal of self-censorship on the part of social scientists as well as an avoidance of issues that are seen as sensitive or challenging to the state or other powerful interests in society (including the private sector and political parties and movements). For our aspirations to be realised there is a need for Arab organisations that extend support (financial, training, networking)

to researchers, especially junior researchers at the beginning of their careers. It is for this purpose, primarily, that the ACSS was founded.

Today, the ACSS, as an emerging institution seeking to carve out its niche in the regional landscape of knowledge organisations, aims to support independent research and meet the multiple needs of researchers in the region. It aspires to address the dynamic changes facing Arab societies, in all of its manifestations, but also to improve the infrastructure for knowledge production in terms of training, methodology and access to research resources. The ACSS was established in response to the challenges facing research in the Arab region and aspires to become a reference organisation that supports researchers working on issues of concern to Arab societies and simultaneously networks and enhances communication among those researchers within the scientific community.

### What relationships does the ACSS have with other scientific associations, and why are these relationships valuable?

It is part of the vision of ACSS to operate as a network of networks and to encourage collaborations with different types of academic institutions in the Arab region and beyond. As such, the ACSS has entered into agreements with Asian universities and transnational networks as well as with Research Councils in Africa, Latin America and the United States. The ACSS is an institutional member of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) as well as the Middle East Studies Association and the Arab Foundations Forum.

A major interest of the ACSS is to establish and support

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collaborative research that can begin to erode longstanding knowledge hierarchies between North and South and Centres and Peripheries. We know that this is a difficult challenge given clear inequalities in resources, opportunities and institutional infrastructures. However, there are also significant and growing experiences of south-south collaboration as well as “writing back” from the Global South. Scholarly circuits are less one-dimensional (South to North) than they have been in the past. That said, research collaboration might be most difficult within the region itself, where organisations tend to be under staffed and over worked and also differ greatly in terms of their capacities and access to resources. In this light, the various newly founded satellites of international organisations and western universities in the region are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they do contribute to enhanced cooperation and increased resources, but on the other hand, also run the risk of reinforcing existing patterns of inequality.

### Are there any tools that you see as being particularly useful in helping ACSS to strengthen social science research in the Arab world?

The most important resources for social science research in the region are space and time. Regional researchers are overburdened and overcommitted. Their efforts are fragmented and guided by short-term requirements. This is true whether they are junior or senior faculty at a university, or researchers with NGOs or consultants in the development arena. They answer to too many audiences and clients. Therefore there are no quick fixes since the problems are a symptom of the political economy of research in the region. However, programmes could be put in place to provide multi-year support for researchers as well as residential fellowships that would give them ability to focus, collaborate and develop their expertise in particular fields. For junior researchers methodological training is important especially with new approaches and tools for data gathering and analysis. Access to data of all types (statistical, archival, visual, etc.) remains very limited and is an important barrier to innovations in research in the region. Finally, the ACSS has focused on the issue of research ethics in the social sciences as

an underdeveloped field in the region and is working on developing tools and an electronic platform to both disseminate the principles of ethical research but also to interrogate the applicability of standardised guidelines, especially in the contexts prevailing in the region.

One of the important projects at the ACSS is the Arab Social Science Monitor (ASSM) which aims at establishing a permanent observatory of social science higher education and research in the Arab region. The project documents the infrastructures of knowledge production in terms of institutions and resources and chronicles the work, careers and accomplishments of Arab social scientists in the region. One of the key publications of the ASSM is the Arab Social Science Report (ASSR), a biennial publication on the evolving state of social science research in the region.

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