# What is the role of the social sciences in the response to COVID-19? 4 priorities for shaping the post-pandemic world

*Science has been central to informing policy in the response to COVID-19. But ensuring the successful implementation of these policies and the direction of a long-term recovery is the role of the social sciences.* **Dr Rachel Middlemass** *outlines the specific contributions that social sciences have to play in informing how we rebuild post-pandemic and the 4 priorities for researchers in ensuring that this role is realised.*

*This post is the first in a series exploring the role of SHAPE subjects in the post-pandemic landscape*

*SHAPE: Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy*

COVID-19 has devastated communities and economies around the world and profoundly changed the ways in which we live and work. Many of those effects will no doubt prove to be temporary, but the pandemic has also created opportunities for us to "build back better" once the immediate threat recedes. While medical science has been front and centre of the response to the virus itself, social scientists have a powerful role to play in our recovery from it.

## How can the social sciences inform the response to COVID-19?

The social sciences don't produce much in the way of patentable widgets or, indeed, life-saving vaccines. However, the analysis and insights they generate can and do underpin better-evidenced decisions and help guide and target insights from the 'natural' sciences. There is no point devising lockdowns that nobody will follow or developing a vaccine that nobody will take. Social scientists can help policy-makers and STEM colleagues develop solutions that people are able and, crucially, willing to follow through on. Work by social scientists on the effective, acceptable delivery of mass vaccination programmes, for example, might soon be highly relevant. Because they tell us important things about human behaviours, relationships and institutions, social scientists can help deliver these outcomes.

Social sciences also have an urgent role to play in ensuring that the voices of communities affected by an issue are represented in discussions of it, and that relevant stakeholders are able to be involved in decisions that affect them. For example, we might usefully revisit lessons learned from anthropological work delivering rapid, real-time advice and guidance during the Ebola crisis which saved lives and reduced the spread of the outbreak. These and many other examples of the impacts of social science demonstrate the importance of having local knowledge, which the social sciences can provide.

This capacity to support inclusion is crucial to the work that lies ahead to rebuild things the *right* way rather than (necessarily) just the old way. A recent report by the Centre for Economic Performance and the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment (both at LSE) emphasises the importance of involving businesses and communities in developing a strategy for inclusive and sustainable recovery. A "better" post-recovery world will undoubtedly also benefit from the well-documented contributions that social sciences make in areas such as improving the resilience of our democracies and financial systems, exposing and addressing social and economic inequalities, and promoting good mental health and more sustainable ways of living.

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## Ensuring that the social sciences realise this role: four priorities

### 1.Collaboration

To fully realise these potential benefits, this may be a good time for the social sciences to get their house in order by reducing some of the major barriers to impacts. We might think, for example, about ways to increase support for **collaboration** with industry, communities and third sector organisations, as well as with policy-makers. These diverse stakeholders have different needs. They work to different timescales and are interested in different academic angles and outputs. Understandably, researchers usually need help with the navigation (and administration) of engagement with them.

An effective response will also entail collaboration between and within academic disciplines, including with STEM colleagues. Many universities are good at promoting and supporting interdisciplinary research, bolstered by recognition in the [Stern Review](#) of its 'essential role…in addressing complex problems'. This support should be maintained and increased where appropriate to continue to leverage the insights that cross-disciplinary work yields.

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## 2.Visibility

The social sciences could further want to work to improve their **visibility and accessibility**. Doing so might help increase activity on the 'demand' side of the impact equation; that is, in terms of external partners coming to them for help. It's generally extremely difficult to know who and where to go to for academic insight. This is true in a general sense of universities which, from the outside (and sometimes the inside) appear impenetrable mazes of confusing acronyms and intimidatingly-titled people: even I would still hesitate before cold calling 'Professor The Lord' anybody. However, it's perhaps especially problematic for social scientists because most people don't really know who they are or what they do. If we want communities, businesses and policy-makers to recognise the contributions that social sciences make, we need to improve our visibility. An important step in that direction is the [SHAPE](#) (Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy) launched recently by the British Academy as a way to level up the visibility of these disciplines.

## 3.Credibility

We might further think about ways to maximise the **credibility** of social scientists who, like all 'experts', have taken a pounding in the last decade or so. Part of rehabilitating social science expertise is getting better at tracking, evaluating and describing the impacts of social science research. It's typically hard to draw even correlative, let alone causal links between specific impacts and specific social science research, making it hard to prove the nature and value of the contribution that research makes. Getting better at evaluating and communicating the benefits of social science research – even (or especially) when that can't be counted in pounds, shillings and pence – is essential. Whatever one's thoughts on the slickness and utility of the Research Excellence Framework in the round, its inclusion of [impact case studies](#) has been a boon in this respect.

## 4.Incentives

Finally, it's time to think hard about how we **incentivise and reward** busy researchers to participate in all of this. The reputational and potential financial incentives for institutions are clear. For individual academics, though, taking time away from research and teaching to work on knowledge exchange and impact often seems like a luxury they can ill afford, even if they're keen for their research to make a difference beyond academia. Proper provision of time, expertise and resource to support their efforts, and sincere and enthusiastic celebration of their success, might partly determine the extent of the social sciences' participation in recovery. This can be expensive but it is an investment worth making for a better – and more evidence-based – future.

*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below*

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