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Contribution to the Panel Discussion “How humanities excellence is able to emerge with outstanding international impact.”

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I have been asked to give a brief statement with regard to the question: **What could international co-operations within the Humanities and Social Sciences contribute to facilitate sustainable design and development of societies?**

Sustainable development needs an innovation-oriented society with a knowledge-based economy. The role of the humanities and social sciences for such a society has been acknowledged worldwide. I briefly quote from an Australian report on the issue: ‘These disciplines [humanities and social sciences] provide the organisational, management, legal, accounting and marketing knowledge bases that are critical to successful innovation. They are the source of many of our insights into the human condition broadly, and to our understanding and managing the consequences of moving to a knowledge-based economy’ (AAH, 2003)

Over the past three years, together with colleagues, I have developed a networking program for the sustainable development of the Danube River Basin<sup>1</sup>. The Basin is a vast, multilingual and multi-ethnic space divided into many nations but sharing a common natural heritage. Its inhabitants are, nolens-volens, connected by the Danube and its many tributaries. One man’s effluent is another one’s drinking or irrigation water; watersheds are connected laterally and longitudinally above- and below ground. They are therefore **real laboratories** for experimenting with the collaborative effort necessary for sustainable development of society. I would like to apply the experience I gained with the Danube:Future project to the Käte Hamburger Kolleg discussion. I want to draw your attention to **three areas** in which Humanities and Social Sciences contribute to facilitate sustainable design and development of societies. Each of them is connected to one or more of the KHKs.

The first area is **Cultural Heritage**. The humanities and social sciences are urgently needed to foster sustainable development in the war-torn Danube Basin with its high potential for conflict due to the contested legacy of nationalism, genocide and wilful destruction of the cultural heritage to destroy identity. The Council of Europe, in a 2011 resolution called for exploring cultural heritage for its potential to foster peace after or even instead of conflict (Council of Europe, 2011). The council argues that heritage provides a channel for knowledge and the mutual recognition of diversity and can thus stimulate dialogue between people and communities (Council of Europe, 2011: 5). UNESCO’s work is based on the understanding that the preservation of cultural heritage has effects on development, social cohesion and peace and hence, needs to be integrated into national and local policies. UNESCO’s website emphasizes the same point: “UNESCO will continue to monitor [...] highlighting the role that can be played by culture in situations of conflict or post-conflict as a ‘vehicle’ for reconciliation through cultural heritage”.<sup>2</sup>

But immaterial (“traditions”) and material cultural heritage should not be seen naively as a cure for conflict, but rather as multi-faceted and ambiguous. This is actually a good thing, as it allows for communication about it between different groups. To quote John Daniel Gibling on the issue: “[...] post-conflict healing from psychological and cultural perspectives should not be assessed based on simplistic linear and universal values. Instead, it is better understood as an intensified, but

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<sup>1</sup> [www.danubefuture.eu](http://www.danubefuture.eu)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/dialogue/intercultural-dialogue/>

ambiguous, form of renewal based on the use of emotive symbols, as part of a larger anthropological undertaking of continuous individual or cultural (re)production.” (Giblin, 2014, 514)<sup>3</sup>.

The second issue is the **necessity of a long-term**, back-casting interdisciplinary **approach** to the environmental issues at the core of sustainable development. The interaction between humans and dynamic, complex, moving ecosystems that are dependent on climate, morphology, soils, plants animals and micro-organisms, which have often been changed by human interventions, forming hybrid socio-natural sites, needs a long-term perspective on BOTH nature AND society. Interactions are non-linear, with time lags, threshold effects and feedbacks. Environmental issues tend to be wicked problems sensu Rittel and Webber, 1973, problems that defy a simple approach. The environmental humanities are called to contribute here in co-operation with the paleo-sciences (Winiwarter, 2013, 2014).

The third area is **participatory planning**. Social sciences and the emerging environmental humanities are needed for participatory planning (Vervloet et al, 2005: 156f), which involves different actors such as government and non-governmental agencies, inhabitants and enterprises in a process of transdisciplinary negotiation. Experts need to be prepared to find locally accepted compromises rather than coming with a one-size-fits-all approach. When participatory planning is involved in the creation or re-creation of cultural heritage, developing heritage can trigger processes of empowerment and is therefore a field of **experimental democracy**, which in itself is a **prerequisite for sustainability**. Vervloet and colleagues also point out that radical imagined futures can open a space for negotiation about more mundane and practical solutions by widening the vision of the people involved. Participatory planning can be a laboratory for negotiation and help develop democracy at the same time as promoting a sense of belonging and identity.

Now, finally, let me emphasize that all three themes need internationalized approaches towards culture. International co-operation ensures that multiple perspectives are brought into the discussion on sustainable development. Not only does this make interdisciplinary co-operation easier, the riches of different scholarly traditions with their different methods and areas of expertise can be brought to the service of society. Culture is central to the endeavour: A civilization’s culture is the house of meaning - it is what gives human beings their sense of living in a world organized by meanings and values, a world that makes sense and provides fulfilling goals for action.

Cultures are ways of inhabiting and adjusting to the world and the conditions of life. Ultimately, to use the insights of John Dewey, democracy cannot merely "tolerate" diversity; it alone of all forms of civilization requires diversity. Thus there is an initial need to encounter difference meaningfully. We must be able to employ a complex understanding of the world and its traditions to contextualize the diversity we encounter (Alexander, 1995). I would like to add an important insight here, turning the argument I just made upside down, because it is true in both directions: **Democracy needs sustainable development**. In an ecologically degraded world, long-term economic development is impossible and social unrest will increase.

Democracy is predicated on the perpetual possibility of communication, and who, but fields of knowledge such as the area studies, the study of religion and that of conflict, but even more basic, the languages and their literatures, but also music and the arts in general provide us with the communicative abilities in the ‘shared house of meaning’ in which we can develop sustainably?

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<sup>3</sup> This argument is made more fully in the upcoming edition of the DIANet school 2015 to be published by the end of June. See [www.danubefuture.eu](http://www.danubefuture.eu) for an update.

The KHKs allow an internationally relevant concentration of expertise in several of the fields that are central to my argument and I congratulate the German government on its insight in setting them up. The initiative should by all means be continued.

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