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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Given the nature of this meeting, I thought it would be useful to address the subject of social science research from the standpoint of the Venezuelan experience, and, more particularly, of CONICIT's current efforts to make the scientific and technological research of our scientists increasingly relevant to our society.

The proposal that follows is presented as an illustration of a way to go about deciding on subjects of research. In all fairness, it must be said that it embodies the theoretical and practical efforts of several people in CONICIT, on which I have drawn to compose these pages.

Research as a Matter for Peers and Non-peers

Despite the undeniable gains during recent years, it can still be said that, on average, our research is running almost parallel to the dynamics of our economy and society, seemingly having little to do with them, and considered almost as an activity that can be done without. This assessment is concretely expressed, to cite only one example, in its treatment, or perhaps it would be more candid to say mistreatment, in budget allocations.

We still have before us the task of building an institutional structure—in the broader sense of values, approaches, standards, organizations and routines—in which science and researchers are no longer viewed as parts of a "sector," or as a kind of socially closed-off area with ghetto overtones, in which activities of a markedly individual nature are carried on in subjects and for purposes based mainly and almost solely on "peer standards" and the quest for academic excellence, the latter generally defined by international parameters.

An institutional structure that, on the other hand, opens up research to society, makes it a matter of concern not only to researchers, but also to the most diverse actors in society, requiring their views and decisive participation. In other words, an
institutional structure must allow the collective construction of research agendas using mechanisms that allow the various sectors of society, including, of course, those who have almost customarily been excluded, to frame, from the standpoint of their interests, the questions to be answered by research. In addition, an institutional structure is one in which research is not seen as a laboratory-bound end in itself but merely as the final link in a long chain that includes, as essential links, disparate organizations that unite their capabilities to make it possible to establish a connection with society, otherwise known as innovation. And, finally an institutional structure is one that makes research not just a matter among peers, which it is undoubtedly, legitimized by the standard of excellence, which it also must be without doubt, but also a matter that involves "non-peers," who, moreover, are guided in an important way by criteria of relevance and utility.

Social Science Research

CONICIT is attaching great importance to research in the social sciences, a field long neglected on the grounds—never openly stated, but real nonetheless—that the only sciences are the "hard" sciences, and the others are "humanities."

We discourse among ourselves, as several of our thinkers have insistently pointed out, using references, concepts, and ideas brought to us from the outside, on the basis of which we chart policies and strategies for matters ranging from public education, through urban violence, the organization of work, and the design of health care programs, to the control of inflation.

Our social researchers owe an enormous debt to society. They face the task of developing ideas that are more their own—and I hope this is not misinterpreted as advocacy of isolationism, of stupid autarchy—with which we can understand one another and take our place in the world of today in a manner consistent with our own values and interests, capabilities, and opportunities.

Construction of the Social Research Agenda

In several fields (including, of course, the social sciences), CONICIT has been working for some time to construct research agendas. These agendas are drawn up
in a process of broad, diverse consultation that includes the researchers, but also and most particularly, a variety of social actors as well. I am speaking of the "non-peers," to whom I have already referred, who have their own views on the social relevance of proposed research projects that are awarded on the basis of public bidding.

In a process whose details lie beyond the purview of this presentation, CONICIT has framed a series of thematic criteria as the basis for the selection of lines of research and projects. As will now be seen, they span a broad range of aspects and lie at the methodological core of the agenda.

There are 10 thematic criteria:

— **Viability:** feasibility in the generic sense of the term. Of special importance here are the various types of resources required by the project or line of research in question.

— **Relevance:** the connection with problems in the social sciences that are considered important by both the scientific community and the population at large.

— **Utility:** whether the project or line of research fills a gap in knowledge that is blocking the solution of a problem or the seizing of an opportunity; whether the knowledge so acquired can lead to practical recommendations for the solution of some important problem: is the project or line aimed at meeting the needs of those who govern, producers, planners, etc.?

— **Theoretical and methodological justification:** self-explanatory.

— **Interdisciplinariness:** whether the project can generate foci or chains of scientific activity that involve other projects and/or disciplines and/or research centers in addition to those principally involved in the project; whether it is designed as a research package involving several disciplines and/or research centers.

— **Links with research already carried out or in progress:** whether it is pioneering, redundant, or cumulative; whether it can serve as an input for other research; whether it is being used as an input by other research.
— Links with potential beneficiaries and/or users of the research and/or of its results: whether some type of relationship with them has been foreseen.

— Level of impact: whether its impact is international, national, regional, or local.

— Contribution to society’s understanding of itself: whether the research contributes to a better understanding of our collective identity, to a stronger awareness of our history, a clearer vision of where we are in our development, and a better knowledge of our real values.

— Specific focus: noteworthy targets. For example, whether it refers to a chronic or acute version of a problem, which is an important matter in how the project is designed, or whether it aims at the detection and/or clearance of bottlenecks; whether it looks at emerging trends, processes tending toward obsolescence or the metamorphosis of what was into something different. Or whether, on the contrary, it is concerned with stable or ultra stable strata in the face of social events.

Thematic Approach of the Social Sciences Research Agenda

A process which, again, cannot be described here in detail but which, of course, also entailed extensive and diverse consultations, resulted in the selection of The Situation and Performance of the Venezuelan State as the thematic focus of research in the social sciences.

In implementing this proposal the initial consideration has been the fact that the situation of our State and the resulting possibilities for performance have revealed themselves as primary causes of the problems that can be studied by the social sciences, as well as equally important obstacles to the solution of those problems.

The reason for this is the positively key role held or acquired by the Venezuelan State in the general, sectoral, regional, or any other configuration of the country, initially as the owner and administrator of the country’s petroleum, its leading source of revenue.
This places the thematic focus far "upstream" in relation to both its power to explain events and developments and the beneficial effects that the generation of knowledge about it can have on life in the country. It is not hard to show, if need be, how seemingly very abstract research subjects relating to situations and processes of the State have a very concrete bearing on day-to-day events and situations in the streets of any of our cities.

This thematic focus can, in turn, be broken down into more specific headings that are at the core of the agenda:

— Historical processes that shape the State relative to its present situation and performance. The pathways, processes and conditions that have led to critical and transforming situations in the history of the Venezuelan State.

— Processes for the production and accumulation of knowledge and beliefs in the structures of the State. The manner of the generation and accretion of the assumptions, theories, and knowledge that underlie the policies and strategies designed to address problems in the area of concern, which processes lead to the prevalence at a given point of one economic, criminological, educational, health, or management theory or another; how they give rise to unexamined assumptions that become a kind of prevailing "common sense" in a given field.

— Impact of the constitutional and legal order on the situation and performance of the State. The situation and consequences of the legal system in which the actions of the State are taken.

— Options for reform of the State and the impact of those already implemented. Evaluations of reforms already implemented and investigation of situations and conditions for their successful continuation or transformation, or for the implementation of new processes.

— Factors blocking reform of the State. Bottlenecks, gaps in knowledge, and uncertainties that interfere with processes for the reform of the State.

— Design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies. This line should answer such questions as: how are public policies formulated in the country, with what data and methods, and following what consultations, and how does that formulation
process affect their impact? That is, what are the conditions for the success of public policies, which elements hinder the implementation of those policies, and what is the magnitude of the impact of policies that do and do not succeed?

— **The State and informal processes.** Evaluation and management of non-formal ways of proceeding that become established in society and how they relate to the performance of the State (as generator of employment, guarantor of justice, communicator, and generator of social well-being).

— **The State and anomie.** Fraying of the social fabric and the effects thereof. Refers to social phenomena that take place in a framework of high uncertainty and that involve very low levels of quality of life.

— **Communication between the State and the population—forms, actors, impacts.** Perceptions of the population about the performance of the State based on the information it releases. Interpretation of expectations and attitudes generated by decentralized decision-making. The actors involved in these processes and the conditions they generate in the communications media.

— **Social science research on these matters.** Analysis of the research done in-country on these subjects. Impact of their results, amounts, relevance, redundancies, gaps, updating requirements.

In turn, once again, these thematic areas can be opened or closed to a greater or lesser degree, as preferred, to keep them focused on the State as a whole or on any of its parts, or to concentrate on some particular aspect of the situation or action of the State.

Finally, it must be noted that these thematic areas must be coupled with the selection criteria, and the two together, in keeping with the proposal being framed, constitute the matrix for the comprehensive evaluation of research projects to be publicly bid for by CONICIT.