

# AESIS

NETWORK FOR  
ADVANCING & EVALUATING THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF SCIENCE

## 14, 15, 16 October 2020

*Welcome to the fourth international **AESIS** conference on*

# Impact of Social Sciences and Humanities



Work Wellness Institute  
L'institut de bien-être au travail



COLLABORATIVE



## Group of Chief Scientific Advisors



KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE  
AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

*Pearl Dykstra*

*AESIS 2020 Conference on the "Impact of Social  
Sciences and Humanities"*

*Online, hosted from Ottawa*



The Netherlands has several advisory councils in the SSH domain, e.g.

- Education Council
- Council for Culture
- Social and Economic Council
- Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy
- Advisory Council on International Affairs

Crucial:

- The cabinet has an obligation by law to respond to their scientific advice



European  
Commission

## Group of Chief Scientific Advisors



**Pearl Dykstra**  
Sociology  
(Netherlands)



**Elvira Fortunato**  
Materials Science  
(Portugal)



**Nicole Grobert**  
Chemistry  
(UK)



**Éva Kondorosi**  
Biology  
(Hungary)



**Rolf-Dieter Heuer**  
Physics  
(Germany)

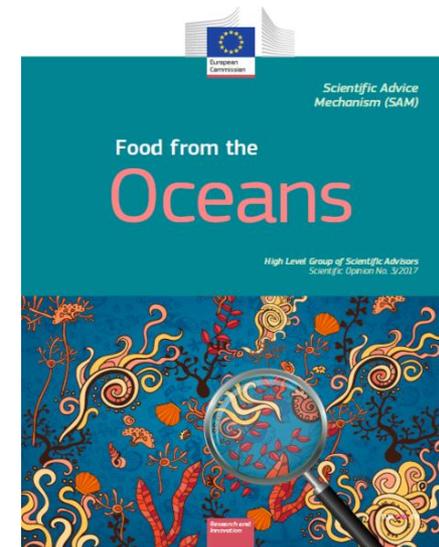
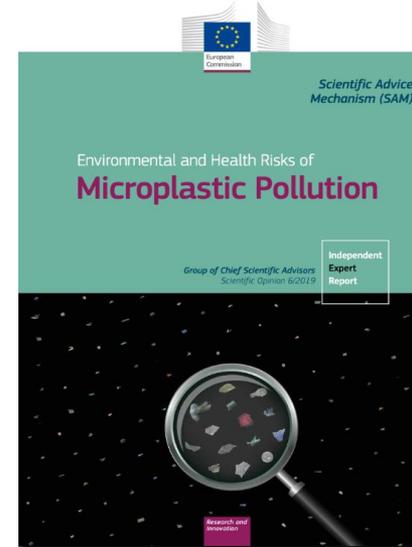
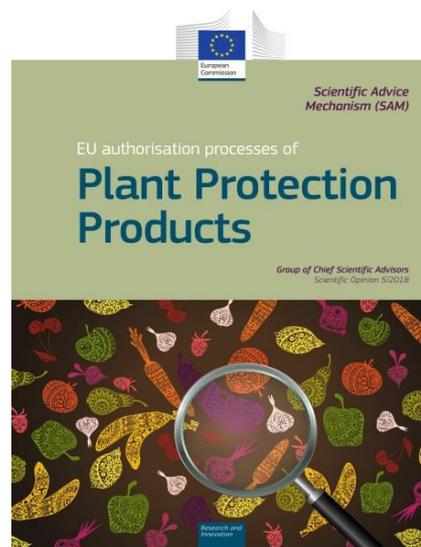
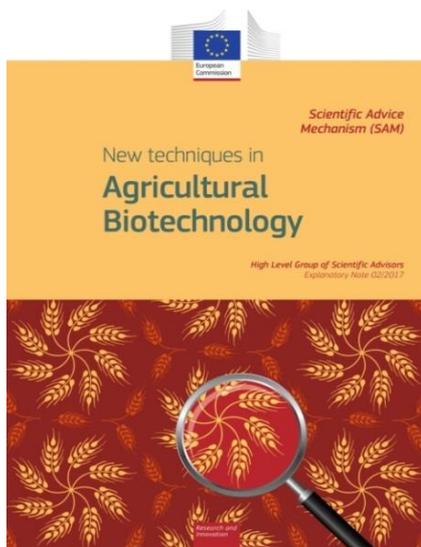
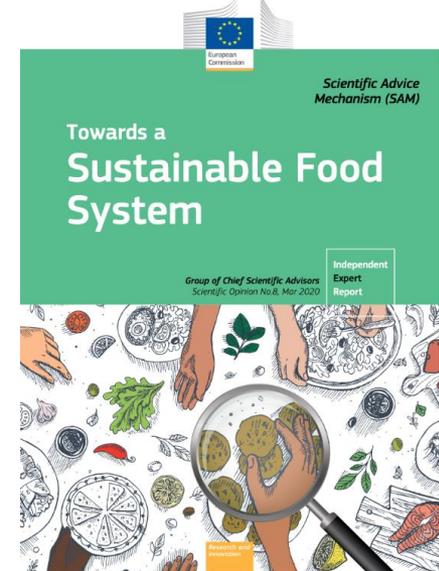
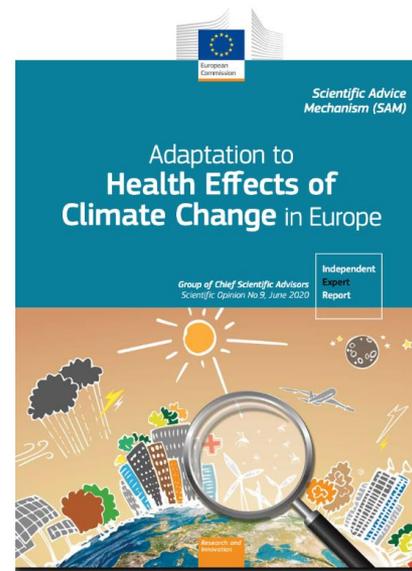
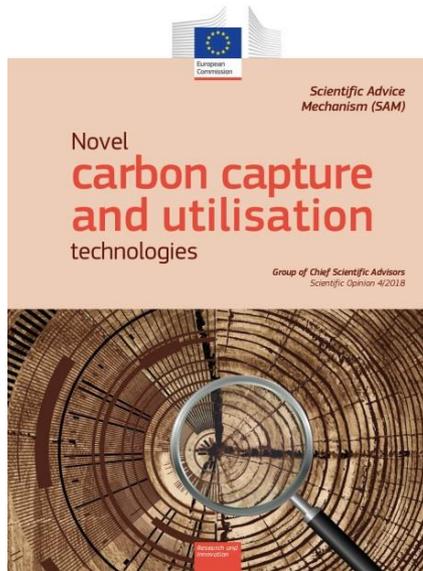


**Carina Keskitalo**  
Political Sciences  
(Sweden)



**Sir Paul Nurse**  
Genetics  
(UK)

# Examples of our scientific opinions

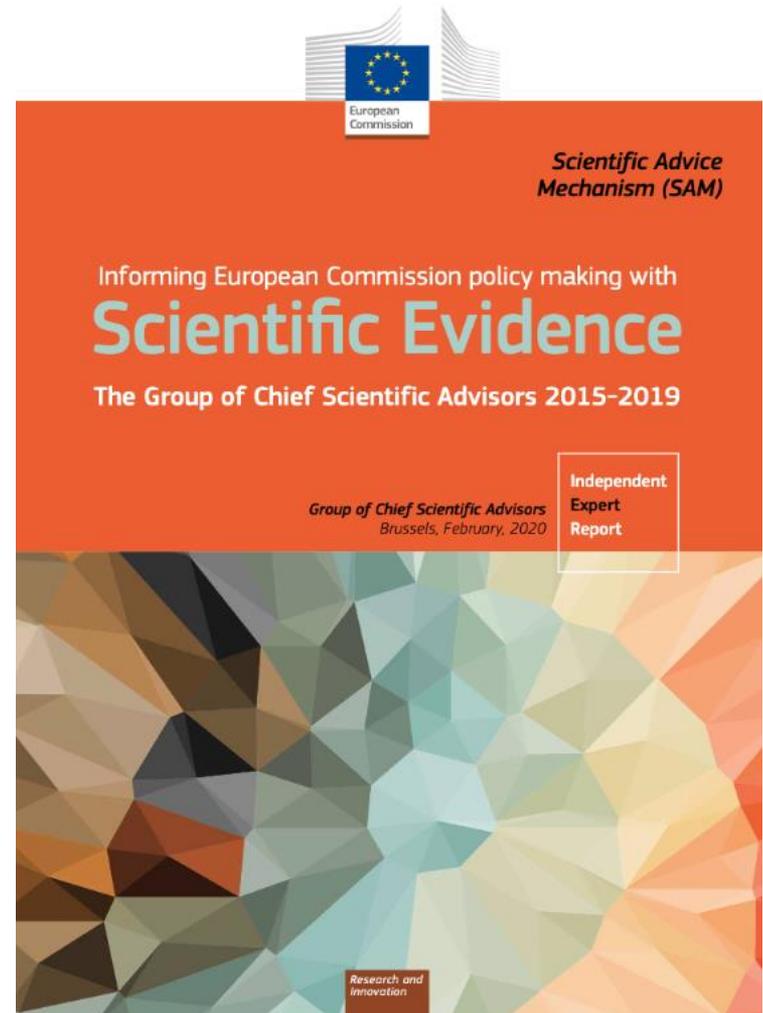


# Examples of our scientific opinions



# Lessons learned

- Policy solutions for “big issues” require collaboration across multiple disciplines
- “Engineering” topics can benefit from insights from human sciences (e.g. energy transition)
- “People” topics can benefit from insights from engineering (e.g. social isolation)
- Engaging with other disciplines requires time and effort



# Transformational Knowledge: Research Impact in South Africa

Professor Crain Soudien



science & innovation

Department:  
Science and Innovation  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



# Overview

- What is distinctive about the South African research system and how the notion of “impact” functions within it, both historically and within the context of the nation’s transformational objectives?
- How is research impact being understood and practiced currently, and with what limitations?
- How must our conceptualisations and governance of knowledge be revisited in order to account for the full complexity of how knowledge acts in the world (both its history and potentialities) in promoting an idea of transformational knowledge?

# Research Impact in South Africa

- Research impact signifies the role of knowledge within the social contract and its utility in the advancement of society.
- Builds on existing and historical thinking around the role of knowledge in a transformational and developmental context.

*“Human and social scientists play a vital role in providing critical analyses of national goals, choices about development policies and strategies, and other national issues pertaining to the transformation of South African society. Their involvement is crucial to a deeper understanding of social issues and to stimulating public debate that could lead to a reconsideration of chosen paths. Equally important to any society that seeks to be innovative in its response to the demands of global change is social research that identifies and explains global trends and their implications in political and economic life, communications and lifestyle changes. Research in the social sciences is therefore of fundamental importance, particularly at this point in our history.” (Science and Technology White Paper, 1996: 12)*

# Research Impact in South Africa

## Methodologies of Research Impact

Utilisation of SSH methodologies in order to construct a framework for governing all sciences.

**Ex post:** programme evaluations and the development of matrixes, metrics, rubrics and indicators by which to measure and quantify the effect of knowledge in the world, built on the conceptualisation of “impact” as an auditable event.

**Ex ante:** narrative forecasts of what research might achieve.

*“Uptake trajectories beyond the scholarly environment, and even within it, are so hard to predict that the assumptions are frequently too idealistic, diminishing the credibility and utility of the effort”. (NRF, 2014: 5)*

# Role of the SSH

SA innovation system increasingly promoting the application of SSH research to solve SA's grand challenges (poverty; inequality; unemployment), and in response to rapid societal changes largely brought about by technological advancements.

*“There are international concerns about the diminishing role of the humanities and social sciences in academia and the wider knowledge sphere. While, in South Africa, the evidence does not support concerns about the prioritisation of the natural, physical and engineering sciences over the humanities and social sciences, it is necessary for the latter to play a stronger role in the science system, and not only in a narrow utilitarian sense or as mere supporting disciplines. The challenge is to incorporate the knowledge and insight of the humanities and social sciences into research and innovation in the natural, physical and engineering sciences.” (DSI White Paper, 2019: 45)*

## **R&D expenditure in SA (Molotja & Ralphs 2018)**

80% - natural sciences, engineering and health research

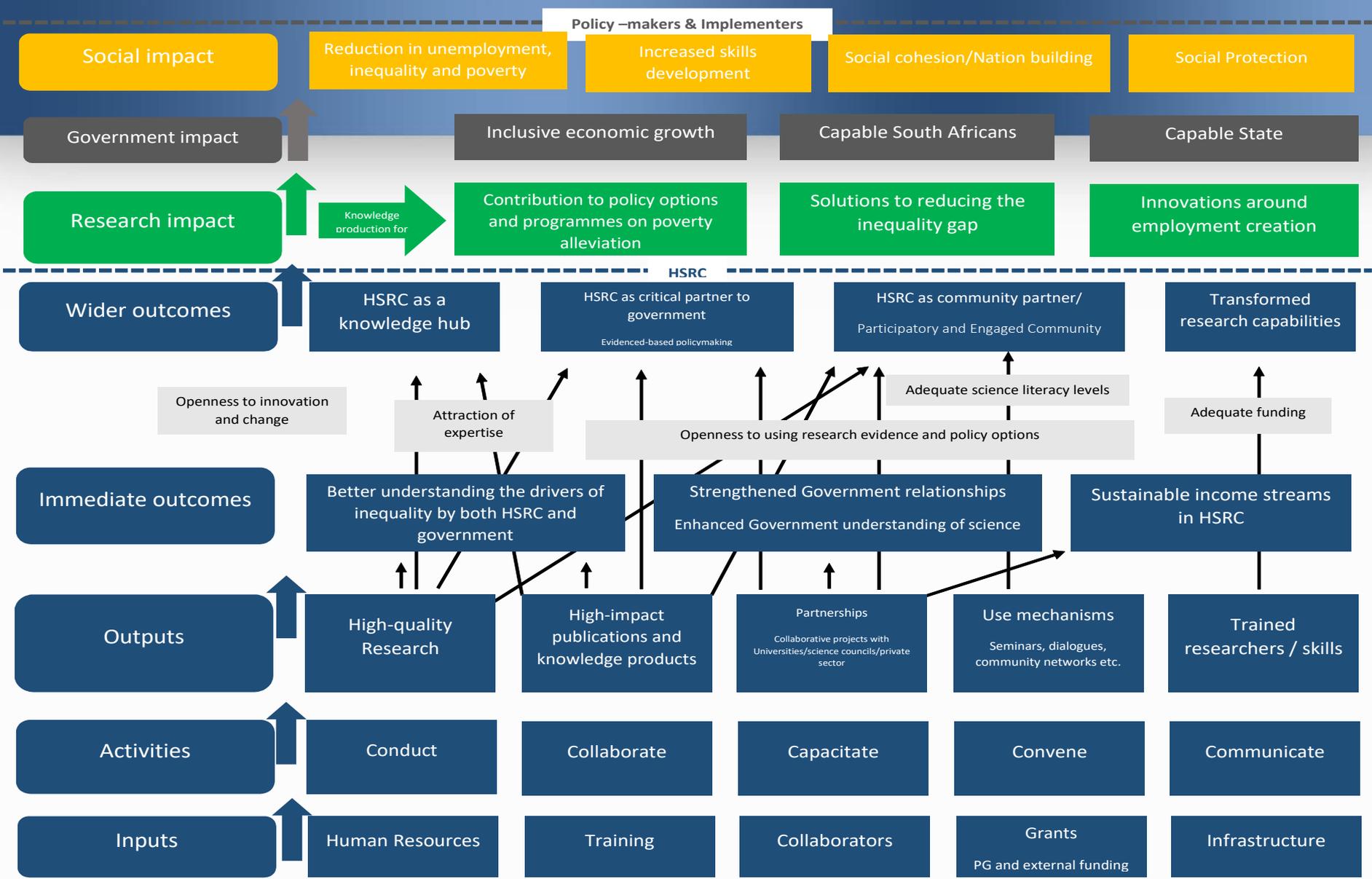
17% - social sciences

2% - humanities

# Impact in South Africa's Research and Innovation System

## Impact in the SA Research and Innovation system

- Tacitly views knowledge as *instrumental* to social change.
- Discourse around impact totalizes the knowledge system, claiming to sit above and account for all that knowledge does and can do.
- Research impact enterprise is currently quasi-administrative and rather than intellectual or critically reflexive.
- Impact conceived as an auditable event of effect on society attributable to a distinct knowledge product.
- Takes as its starting point that the “value” of knowledge can be made readily intelligible to systems of power and governance (ironically, through SSH methodologies).



# The limits of knowledge as instrumental

Normative value chain positions research as outside of the society from which it arises and into which it returns.

Instrumentalist conceptualization of knowledge echoes the discourse of the national innovation system, with three major implications:

1. Assumes a positivist understanding of knowledge as inherently ethical, and the progress of science to be linear and ascendant. In the SA context this constitutes a critical forgetting of the country's history of scientism.
2. Limits space (and legitimacy) for critical knowledges that challenge the status quo and critique the practices of the state.
3. Simplifies and limits value until recognised as “evidence” by society or policy makers, thus failing to recognise knowledge as an agent of change in and of itself, knowledge as transformational.

# History of Scientism in South Africa and the HSRC

- Research impact readily forgets the knowledge/power nexus: knowledge is inseparable from forms of power and their effects (Foucault).
- In South Africa, the sciences worked to legitimize state practices and justify policies of separation and hierarchisation, and were presupposed to be the singular means through which the world could be understood (Soudien, 2015).

Evidence informed policy-making in the history of the HSRC, with its close relationship to the apartheid state and its status quo:

*'Government decisions were made on the basis of proper information'* (Tjaart van der Walt, HSRC ex-President, cited in White, 1992).

Praetorian sensibility: knowledge on guard of the state.

# Transformation in South Africa

Underpinned by the Constitution (1996) and implies a radical change from one state or condition to another.

## ***What does impact as transformation look like?***

- Producing deep change in society in line with the transformational objectives of SA
- Geared toward deliberate social outcomes: equality, justice, anti-racism.
- Taking place alongside a reevaluation of what constitutes research excellence (such as, privilege and positionality of the speaker, politics of who is cited).

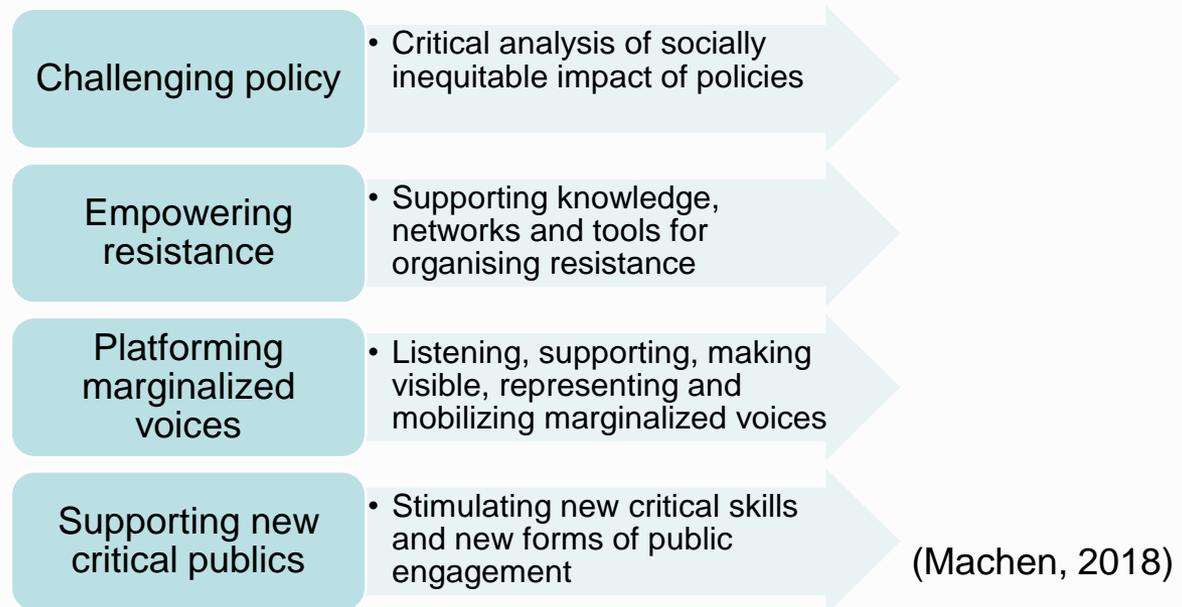
# Transformation in South Africa

## ***Governance of research impact for transformation:***

- What key challenges does SA face, and how do these align with the current and potential knowledge bases?
- How must our conceptualizations of knowledge, and how knowledge acts in the world, be revisited in order to account for and promote an idea of transformational knowledge?
- How do we preserve the intrinsic value of thinking critically within research governing systems that seek to account for the totality of knowledge?

# The Role of Critical Knowledges: Toward Transformation

- If there is too much alignment between the objectives of govt and the objectives of knowledge (as with the history of the HSRC), then space for critique, radicality, and interrogating the status quo is delimited.
- Paramount in transformative contexts with deliberate social outcomes that will not be achieved without knowledge that seeks to be transformative and challenge existing inequalities and injustices within the status quo.



# Transformational Knowledge

- Transformation implies a *force*, some kind of goading agent, which propels the movement and change from one state to another.
- Recognise knowledge as a force, as a form of power than can enact an impact on the world, as an agent of change in and of itself.
- Recognise, too, that societal change tends to be the result of multiple forces, and the attribution of a societal change – whether a change in attitude or behavior – to a particular piece of knowledge is not just incorrect but reproduces the power/knowledge imbrication of scientism.

# Transformational Knowledge

In this sense, we must work toward a more complex understanding of research impact that takes into account a fuller picture of how knowledge acts in the world in ways that are not always linear, predictable, quantifiable and rational, but ephemeral, mutable, non-linear, even chaotic, and that leave open possibilities for new becomings and new potentialities.

# Thank you

[www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za)



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