

# THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL AND INNOVATION



Ben Gibbons  
Public Affairs Manager of the Arts  
and Humanities Research Council

In November last year the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) launched their report entitled *Arts and Humanities Research and Innovation*, which offers a new perspective on the roles that arts and humanities research and the AHRC play in the UK innovation system. This contrasts with traditional understandings of innovation, where the emphasis has been on science and technology. The AHRC and NESTA describe innovation in their report as the successful exploitation of new ideas. It is about finding new uses for knowledge, enhancing products and services, and developing new ways of getting things done. The report is part of the growing body of evidence that links arts and humanities research to innovation thinking.<sup>1</sup>

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The AHRC supports innovation in the UK by funding post-graduate training and post-doctoral research projects, which often involve large collaborative teams that address crucial, many-sided research questions. Joint strategic initiatives with other Research Councils also offer opportunities for researchers to collaborate on addressing large and complex societal problems. This includes the *Global Uncertainties* initiative, which brings together all seven Research Councils to advance understanding of conflict, crime, environmental degradation, poverty and terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

The Design Against Crime Research Centre, based at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, is an exemplar in the field of innovative, practise led design solutions that respond to pressing issues around crime in society.<sup>3</sup> The Centre generates innovative capacity, via the development and dissemination of new design processes and business models, working with numerous commercial partners and has had some of its work funded by the AHRC. The Centre's projects have developed ways of tackling bag and bike theft via the design of innovative crime prevention products such as *Grippa* and

*Bike Off*. Researchers based at the Centre work with the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science, the UK's Designing out Crime Association and Secured by Design – UK police flagship initiatives supporting the principles of designing out crime in the built environment.

It doesn't just stop with the design of new crime prevention products, with both the *Grippa* and *Bike Off* projects being used to train the next generation of designers at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, as well as being used on professional training courses for the police. This ensures a contribution towards the development of world-class, transferable skills, which are essential to the UK's future prosperity and security in the global marketplace.

Innovation is also about finding new uses for knowledge, and the AHRC's knowledge transfer activities connect researchers with non-academic sectors for their mutual benefit. The AHRC also has an intermediary role, creating links between other organisations connected to the arts, humanities and related sectors such as the creative and cultural industries. It provides the structure for people and groups to come together who otherwise may not have come into contact with each other; this is a key part of the successful exploitation of new ideas, whether those ideas are for new products, new services or new uses for knowledge. And of

course, the projects the AHRC supports are underpinned by the rigorous process of peer-review.

Innovation involving arts and humanities researchers often uses what could be described as 'softer' evidence and approaches to problem solving, with some surprising collaborations. An AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship investigating network theory brought together a medieval historian from the University of Glasgow and Volterra, an economic consultancy. This project compared the similarities between the decentralised structures of heretics, such as the Cathars, and the very loosely connected terrorist organisations of the 21st century. The historian, with expertise in the analysis of networks from his research on medieval heresy and the early Inquisition, also provided bespoke training and actively participated in Volterra's work in providing real solutions to business problems. This has enhanced the social network models built by Volterra in areas such as consumer and financial markets, giving the firm comparative advantage in securing new business. Knowledge transfer is fundamental to the innovation system, and this is reflected in the AHRC's growing support for projects in this area; from less than £200,000 in 2005/06 to over £3.3 million in 2007/08.

The UK's ability to address urgent social issues and to remain competitive in global markets rests on innovation.<sup>4</sup>

Solutions to social problems such as conflict, climate change, public health issues, poverty and crime will require fresh thinking and the combined use of technological, cultural, social and economic expertise. As described in the two examples above, innovation is a shared activity which takes place within a broad setting. This success of this activity requires co-operation between government, universities, third sector organisations, businesses and consumers, because innovation flourishes within a culture of tolerance that embraces novelty and a diversity of ideas.

A well-functioning innovation system is always changing and relies on networks built on trust, repeat engagement and 'social capital'. It is also subject to uncertainty and risk, where the application of new ideas may lead to unintended consequences, but these risks have to be accepted if innovation is to thrive. Researchers also have the critical and analytical skills to challenge assumptions and entrenched ways of working, while providing a sense of the historical context, traditions and culture in which society and the economy function.

Arts and humanities research has a strong affiliation with the creative industries, which arts and humanities research help to fuel. Creative industries, in turn, stimulate and support innovation in the UK. The AHRC is involved in bridging activities between the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Technology Strategy Board, and policymakers increasingly understand how arts and humanities research feeds into the innovation system. The AHRC will build on this understanding by continuing to

articulate and demonstrate how public funding for arts and humanities research supports advances in innovation, society and the economy in the UK.

- 1 <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News/Events/Documents/AHRI.pdf>
- 2 <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding/Opportunities/Pages/GlobalUncertainties.aspx>
- 3 <http://www.designagainstcrime.com/index.php?q=taxonomy/term/2>
- 4 Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2008) *Innovation Nation*. London: DIUS.

# A 'SIN' TO ACHIEVE THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

In this article Sam Myers briefly highlights contributions which have been made by the Government's global Science & Innovation Network (SIN) towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and the potential for a more sustained global partnership.

The Science & Innovation Network (SIN) comprises 90 officers in 39 cities around the world and is a partnership between the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office. It works on behalf of a range of internal and external customers including Research Councils and the Department for International Development, and has a unique capability to deliver policy advice and action on the ground.

Sam Myers is the First Secretary (Science & Innovation) at the British High Commission in Singapore, and has responsibility for Southeast Asia.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed by world leaders in 2000 to improve the quality of life for the 3 billion people living on less than \$2.15 a day. To be achieved by 2015, they include:

- MDG 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- MDG 2) Achieve universal primary education
- MDG 3) Promote gender equality and empower women

- MDG 4) Reduce child mortality
- MDG 5) Improve maternal health
- MDG 6) Combat HIV and AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- MDG 7) Ensure environmental sustainability
- MDG 8) Develop a global partnership for development

The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee reported in 2004 that "it is impossible to make sustainable progress towards the Goals without harnessing the potential of science and technology, which as part of a vibrant innovation system can provide a route out of poverty for developing countries." Indeed science, technology and innovation are an intrinsic part of the solution for providing clean water, sustainable food supplies, renewable energy, improved infrastructure and basic healthcare in developing countries. Equally importantly they are generators of economic wealth, and are vital in preparing and responding to natural and man-made disasters.

## RECENT EXAMPLES OF SIN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS:

### Case Study 1: Combat Malaria (MDG 6)

*Some 3.2 billion people live at risk of malaria transmission and there are between 350-500 million clinical episodes of the disease every year, which leads to a million deaths. The disease kills a child every 30 seconds, and only 1 in 5 malaria deaths was reported in 2006 (WHO).*

