

Responsible research and innovation – Between funding opportunity and corporate commitment



*This briefing note relates to a series of informal interactions between Wageningen UR colleagues which took place between August 2013 and January 2014. The purpose of these meetings was to explore the concept of **responsible research and innovation** and its connection to Wageningen UR. The concluding argument is an appeal for enhanced corporate-level opportunities to exchange and debate what ideas such as 'science for impact' and 'sustainability' involve and mean in view of both ethical perspectives and long-term societal goals. This will help to frame implications for appropriate design principles in research, innovation and for related development and education programmes. By doing so, it will enhance Wageningen UR's role as part of collective responsibility for present and future generations.*

What does responsible research and innovation (RRI) refer to?

RRI is not about ethical research as such. RRI is part of a family of responsibility-related concepts in society. They all relate to the general concept of collective responsibility, which some (e.g. www.socires.nl) have further elaborated on toward the responsible society. When we unpack the idea of collective responsibility we find a range of responsibility approaches, e.g. in relation to sectors, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), responsible leadership/governance, responsible technology, responsible engineering, and responsible (natural) resource management. RRI basically picks up the concept of (collective) responsibility and applies it in the context of science. It is still, however, a concept in development and there is room for specific approaches such as in the application to life sciences. René von Schomberg (European Commission) has been one of the front line explorers of the concept and implications for practice (<http://renevonschomberg.wordpress.com/>) for which reason he was asked to give a presentation on the topic in Wageningen in August 2013. There is an attachment to this briefing note which provides an

overview of links to relevant website and resources on the topic.

Exploration meetings

Through a series of informal exploration meetings (between August 2013 and January 2014), a number of Wageningen UR staff have exchanged thoughts on the value, relevance, and opportunity of the concept of responsible research and innovation for Wageningen UR. It is a concept which is high on the agenda in EU-supported investments in research and innovation, most notably in the Horizon 2020 programme (<http://tinyurl.com/q9mgm67>; <http://tinyurl.com/RRI-EU2>). Various Wageningen UR colleagues are involved in projects related to this fund. The explorations related not so much to such projects but rather to opportunities for exchange along these lines across science groups, with students and at corporate level. The interactions were initiated and facilitated by the Centre for Development Innovation (CDI), which is part Wageningen UR's Social Sciences Group.

Old wine in new wineskins?

As mentioned above, RRI is not introducing something completely new and re-addresses issues that have been on the agenda in the past as well. Moreover, it builds on initiatives in the past regarding critical approaches to science and technology, regarding the philosophy of science and regarding ethics. These type of initiatives also took place in Wageningen before, such as the initiative to include the point of view of small farmers ("Boerengroep") in the 1970s, the inclusion of systems thinking in the 1990s and the importance of institutional changes (like the Convergence of Science programme <http://www.cos-sis.org/>). Students have often played a critical role in making sure that societal concerns are addressed in research and education. For some reason, a constructively critical attitude to science and technology seems to have faded over the past decade or so. Recent studies such as done by the European Environment Agency illustrate, however, the continuing importance of such attitude (*Late Lessons from Early Warnings –* <http://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/late-lessons-2>).

Looking beyond

We do not propose to embrace some fixed concept of RRI, but rather to use the renewed interest in RRI as a stepping stone toward enhancing a constructively critical attitude towards science, technology in general and to their applications in development processes.

Wageningen UR needs to go beyond inter-disciplinarity and public-private partnerships as the way to approach grand challenges, some of which are wicked problems. Multi-stakeholder processes, futures

thinking (long-term foresight analysis), trans-disciplinary research, and connecting to philosophy of responsibility (in search of meaning), are among possible other dimensions to consider in staying focused as a responsible University.

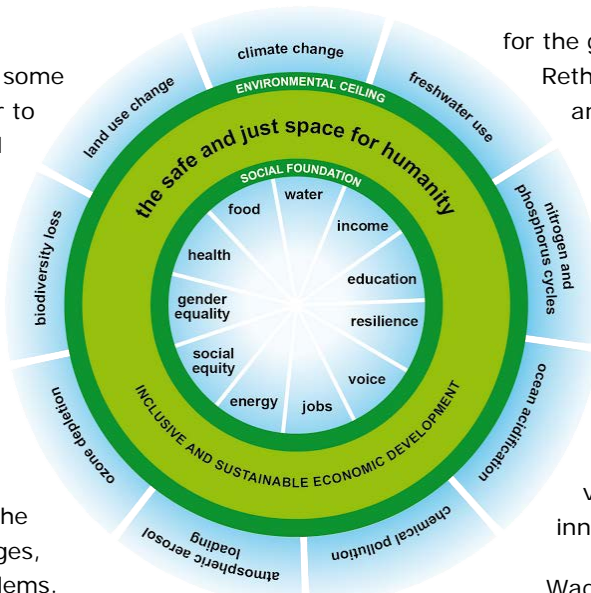
This can prevent that we are profound at the surface (the ability to roll out new knowledge, technologies and programmes), while deep down being superficial because we are not guided nor rooted in perspectives which connect to what constitutes meaning and flourishing in the present and future society.

Integrated ideas on e.g. green growth or the green economy need to also connect to ideas on what constitutes responsibility in society and how we shape it together as society. How do we link to the wider society and join actors that also try to address the challenges we face? Similarly the scores of recent long-term scenarios (the world in 2030, 2050, 2080), require more attention for how we think responsibility needs to play out in scenarios.

There is no single way to look at this. However, we do need to create spaces at different levels to facilitate interaction of different perspectives and rationalities to keep each other aware of implications of choices we make in research and how we can engage in innovation processes.

From funding opportunity to corporate commitment (beyond Horizon 2020)

There are no unified concepts regarding values, ethics, causation, science, and innovation. Furthermore, many roles to be played will somehow need to work together



Source: <http://tinyurl.com/responsiblesociety>

for the good of future generations.

Rethinking and articulating our values and ethical principles will help us take a clear positioning as a centre for research and education in a world that is becoming increasingly complex with old and new challenges in the life sciences. The new solutions we will have to find cannot be based on merely better technologies, but will need to include the rethinking of the core values upon which our research and innovation practice is currently based.

Wageningen UR needs more than scattered platforms for addressing such

issues. Responsible research and innovation relates to its core business and its core mission of science for impact. Wageningen UR may therefore consider creating a more central platform for engaging in meaningful research and debate along the lines of responsible research and innovation. This will also allow for exchanging perspectives on global food security and the idea of sustainable intensification of agriculture. Inspiration may be found in the Centre for Ethics and Technology (<http://ethicsandtechnology.eu/>), and the Centre for Society and the Life Sciences (<http://www.society-lifesciences.nl/1/>). Isn't it time that Wageningen UR has its own centre on responsible life sciences with involvement from across the Science Groups?

We do not suggest mainstreaming one interpretation of what constitutes responsibility in research and innovation, but we do suggest a need to 'keep each other sharp'. To this purpose, we suggest a need to enhance opportunities for studying and debating the meaning of science for impact from a perspective of responsible research and innovation. This would include putting related ideas and topics squarely on (strategic) agendas throughout Wageningen UR, in the first place as a corporate commitment. This will include the need for engaging (civil) society in research and innovation processes from the conception of ideas to the evaluation of effects.

Contact

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