

OUR DUTY TOWARDS SOCIETY

Science serves or should serve a greater duty — that of improving the economic and social conditions of humanity.

To achieve this, science and scientists, most of all, need to have a voice in the discussion of Public Policies, which carry decisions that influence the economic and social outcomes. Public Policies based on the best evidence available and in an open and rich discussion are our best assurance to a more prosperous society — but for this to be possible, the scientific community must join the discussion.

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Benoit Mandelbrot once said that science would be doomed if it worked in narrowly defined specialties, causing scholars to debate only with their closest peers. This echo chamber would then amplify only to the insiders. Mandelbrot compared it to sports: soccer players play soccer; tennis players play tennis; and basketball players play basketball. There is no linkage between the different sports; there is no interdisciplinarity. There is no common ground, except by the very few who enjoy several sports.

While this worked well in sports, said Mandelbrot, it can endanger science. Science benefits from intellectual nomads who can cross disciplines. And perhaps more importantly, science, but above all society, benefits from resolute scientists who want their research to have an impact on society.

By impact, we mean all that may generate prosperity, material or not, to society, contributing to its economic and social development. For many scientists, this means knowledge transfer, usually done through the means of patents or copyrights, but we may also accomplish this objective through other means — through influence. Positively influencing society and its stakeholders, in particular policymakers, to be rigorous with their analysis, to not be immune to acclaimed evidence, to discuss overtly, and to accept discord and pluralism. Such endeavour can be done through Public Policies, a matter from which we have been puzzlingly absent.

Our continued absence from the public policy arena has the effects we all know: precarious public policies that are a burden on taxpayers and do a disservice to society. This does not mean that our participation is a guarantee to infallible public policies — after all, scientists are also (very) fallible. It is my conviction, however, that we can contribute to more rigorous public policies, and rigor is, after all, the crux of science. We may contribute to cogent decision-making and to better-informed policymakers, letting them know that their decisions have an impact well beyond their legislature and that it will be us, citizens, who will bear the costs. We may contribute by informing society in a rigorous and structured way.

This is much more than a prerogative — it is a duty to those who make science, especially those who have reached excellency in doing science. INESC TEC and its Associates have some of the most brilliant minds in the country, but also in the world, which heightens on our duty to be an active and participative actor in the public policy arena.

However, this doesn't mean that we speak with a single voice. There is no such thing in Public Policies. What this means is that we can and should provide meaningful contributions to an overt and amenable discussion, even if our stances are sometimes contradicting. It would be very detrimental to an open society if a research institute which should be plural, heterogeneous and intellectually free had only single thoughts and abiding researchers. Healthcare, in particular, is in desperate need of these contributions. Many decisions that are made rest only on ideological prejudice and bear a cost to society, especially to those who are most vulnerable, a fact to which we cannot remain indifferent. Bad decisions and deficient policy-making impact directly millions of people. Our mission, as scholars, is also to these people — our fellow citizens. Even if everyone is absent from this debate, it will have to be us, scholars, the last people standing to defend the Enlightenment, reason, facts and science. It is not an option. It is our duty.