

### Yhteiskuntatieteellisen ympäristötutkimuksen kehitys Pohjoismaissa

16. pohjoismainen yhteiskuntatieteellisen ympäristötutkimuksen (NESS) konferenssi pidettiin Turussa kesäkuussa 2024. Konferenssi asetui yhteiskuntatieteellisten ja humanististen ympäristötutkijoiden tapaamisten yli 30 vuoden jatkumoon Pohjoismaissa ja niiden ulkopuolella. Tässä kirjoituksessa tarkastelen kokemuksia NESSistä vuosien varrelta, pohdin miksi ja miten konferenssi yhteistyön muotona on säilynyt, ja yritän katsoa pohjoismaisen yhteiskuntatieteellisen ympäristötutkimuksen lähitulevaisuuteen. Piirrän myös laajemman kuvan siitä, miten pohjoismainen yhteiskuntatieteellinen ympäristö- ja kestävyystutkimus on kehittynyt sekä keskustelen sen lupauksista ja mahdollisista sudenkuopista. Kerrontani perustuu henkilökohtaisiin näkemyksiin ja noin neljänkymmenen vuoden kokemukseen tämänkaltaisesta tutkimuksesta, sekä osallistumisesta sen arviointiin Norjassa, Ruotsissa ja Suomessa. Lisäksi hyödynnän tekemääni pientä kyselyä, johon vastasi yksitoista pohjoismaista akateemista kollegaa. Heidän vastauksensa inspiroivat minua etsimään lisätietoja ja herättivät joitain omia muistojani menneestä.

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## Thirty years of NESS conferences in perspective

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL  
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN THE NORDICS

In June 2024, the 16th Nordic Environmental Social Science (NESS) Conference took place in Åbo/Turku, Finland. This meeting represented over 30 years of bi-annual gatherings of researchers within the broad field of social sciences and humanities approaches to environmental studies within the Nordic countries and beyond. In this chapter, I will refer to experiences from NESS over the years, discuss why and how it has survived, and try to look into the near future of Nordic environmental social science research. I will also draw a broader picture of how Nordic social science research on environment and sustainability has emerged and discuss its promises and potential pitfalls. My narrative is based on personal insight and experience from some forty years of being engaged in this kind of research, including its evaluation in Norway, Sweden, and Finland<sup>1</sup>. In addition, I draw upon various research development assessments<sup>2</sup> as well as a simple survey answered by eleven Nordic academic colleagues (without any claim of being representative of all Nordic

- 1 It should be noted that Iceland is not included in this narrative due to less frequent participation of Icelandic ESS researchers in the NESS Conferences, as well as my limited knowledge on the status of ESS in Iceland.
- 2 Much of the description of the early ESS research development comes from Lundgren et al. (2002) and Eckerberg et al. (2003).

ESS researchers). Their replies to my questions<sup>3</sup> have inspired me to search for further information and to awaken some of my memories of the past.

#### THE HISTORY AND FORMAT OF THE NESS CONFERENCES

Back in the early 1990s, there was a growing recognition in the Nordic countries of the need to mobilize social scientists and integrate their contributions into strategic decisions not only about environmental policies but about economic and social development. At the same time, there was a felt need among social scientists to strengthen the social sciences' perspectives within environmental research, as the environmental research conferences tended to treat social sciences as an add-on and many of the disciplinary social science conferences (at that time) did not contain specific environmental thematics. However, initiating NESS was also a direct consequence of the Nordic Council of Ministers' specific support for environmental research in the Nordic countries from 1993 to 1998, which we will return to in the next section. Part of this funding was used to spur Nordic networking among all kinds of researchers focusing on environmental issues from the natural and social sciences. Hence, the original effort to gather environmental social science researchers in the Nordics was largely a result of the availability of new economic support.

Despite lacking a formal organization or steering group for pursuing NESS, it has survived and grown considerably over these 30 years. Every second year, some 100-200 participants gather in either Sweden, Finland, Norway, or Denmark to read and comment upon each other's draft manuscripts which are distributed beforehand to the workshop participants. The general rule has been that participants should stay in the same thematic workshop for 2 to 3 half days to allow for focused in-depth discussions. The workshops'

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format helps build life-long collegial and personal friendships, while plenary sessions – and sometimes also excursions – enable further networking across workshops. This structure of the NESS Conferences has contributed to making it a success. In fact, it was originally inspired by the European Political Science Association's annual Joint Sessions of Workshops held every spring, as the first 'pre-NESS' was organized by political scientists – with professors Lennart J. Lundqvist from Sweden and Jon Naustdalslid from Norway spearheading the initiative. They widened the invitation well beyond political science to the Workshop on Environmental Political and Administration in Oslo in 1993 (as part of a Nordic political science meeting) which proved to be a success.

The first 'real NESS' – as an interdisciplinary endeavor targeting various environmental social science researchers – took place in Gothenburg in 1995. Since then, any Nordic university can express their interest to the organizers of NESS to take over the baton next time, with the universities of Oslo, Umeå, Aarhus, Åbo/Turku, Gothenburg, Helsinki/London, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Trondheim, Tampere and Luleå, having done so up until June 2024. Participants have not only come from Nordic universities, however, but NESS has become attractive also to researchers from many

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3 I posed four questions to Nordic ESS colleagues: (1) What has the organising of NESS Conferences meant to you (or ESS research in general)? (2) Could you think of some important factors (or formative events) that have spurred the development and strengthening of social science/humanities research in pursuit of environment and sustainable development in your country (or discipline)? (3) And the other way around: What – if anything – has prevented the development of social science/humanities research in pursuit of environment and sustainable development in your country (or discipline)? (4) What do you think are the prospects for this kind of research in the future? Are there any foreseeable challenges to be met? Oral or written replies have generously come from the following Nordic colleagues: Erik Hysing, Sweden; Vilma Lehtinen and Marko Joas, Finland; Jon Naustdalslid, Eva Falleth, Lars Gulbrandsen, Sissel Hovik, Jonas Enge and Eli Ragna Terum, Norway; and Anders Branth Pedersen and Karin Hilmer Pedersen, Denmark.

other countries within Europe and beyond, even if its focus remains largely within a Nordic setting. On one occasion in 2009, when researchers from various institutes in Helsinki were to organize NESS, they decided to place the conference in London. This of course attracted more participants than usual from the British Isles. Still, at the end of the London conference, the participants agreed that NESS should continue to be confined to the Nordic countries only since otherwise it might lose its identity and become less interesting even for non-Nordic researchers. Having ‘real-life’ meetings within the Nordic countries is also appreciated due to lowering CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and travel time.

Furthermore, a special feature of NESS conferences concerns the independence of each host university to design the overall topic and workshops according to its research profile, while the involvement of Nordic colleagues in this work is encouraged. The workshops are designed to attract diverse scholars – senior as well as junior – from several (Nordic+) countries and to draw upon different disciplinary/thematic networks. The success behind NESS is both this mixture of disciplinary approaches but also that not too many, and not too few, participants allow for constructive collegial comments on draft manuscripts in an open and equal atmosphere. Participants are thus expected to put time into reading each other’s contributions. This, of course, implies that participants must be interested to read at least some texts thoroughly in advance, which is often not the case in other kinds of conferences. Thus, NESS is far from a ‘show and tell’ conference but goes much deeper into critical discussions over methodologies and results which is highly appreciated by those who attend. Such discussions may awaken the interest of Nordic colleagues to initiate comparative research over specific topics that can provide added value and inspire a search for new funding. It also helps junior scholars to get insight into what is going on in their field of study, and to establish contact with like-minded scholars/people in other university contexts. Indeed, without having any concrete figures to allude to in this respect, the NESS conferences have spurred many Nordic scholars to widen their networking and find new ways to develop their research. Many NESS workshops have also led to publications such as edited books,

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special issues, and co-written articles. Since NESS workshops explicitly formulate important topics to discuss, this has also generated novel Nordic ESS research as such.

At the same time, there is reason to reflect upon who are the researchers – and occasional practitioners interested in knowing more about ESS research – who come to NESS. It is fair to say that political science and sociology-oriented researchers tend to dominate some of the workshops, with much fewer researchers from the humanities, education, law, and economics. Many also come from interdisciplinary research environments centered around topics of environment and sustainability. The latter researchers particularly enjoy the methodological insights and constructive comments that their social science-oriented colleagues can provide. The relative absence of some social science disciplines might be due to which research topics are called for in the announced NESS workshops (since these depend largely upon who belongs to the organizing team) but could also be explained by different networking traditions (and interests) among the respective disciplines. For instance, other conferences are being held regularly for ecological economics, environmental law, environmental humanities, and interdisciplinary sustainability research. The extent to which some social science researchers appreciate the added value of interdisciplinary gatherings might also vary. Having said that, some of my Nordic colleagues note that interdisciplinary papers have been less frequently presented at NESS conferences/events than might be expected, both those spanning more than one ESS discipline and those crossing over to natural sciences. It



NESS-conference was organized by the University of Tampere in 2017 with the theme “Hopefulness”. Jenni Kuoppa and Krista Willman guided conference participants to a boat that took them to conference dinner on Viikinsaari island.

might be that NESS is best appreciated for its insightful comments from Nordic peers, while the more interdisciplinary papers tend to target other environmental conference venues. However, other Nordic colleagues stress rather the opposite: namely, that NESS networks have contributed to developing disciplinary as well as interdisciplinary research perspectives within environment and sustainable development research which has helped Nordic research funders to focus more on ESS topics than before.

#### ESS RESEARCH IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES OVER TIME

The financial support to ESS research has developed quite substantively in all the Nordic countries during the last thirty years, spurred by increasing political attention and debate about environmental problems and sustainability concerns. Simultaneously, demands were raised for social science and humanities to become engaged in teaching their theories and perspectives on those issues in higher education, and new courses were designed in, for example, environmental sociology, ecological economics, environmental philosophy, and environmental law. As an example of the early ESS research funding profile, Swedish ESS research projects included four main areas: (1) environmental administration (planning, policy instruments, etc); (2) environmental economics (cost-benefit analysis, ecological footprints, ecological economics, etc);

(3) lifestyle, attitudes, and behavior and (4) environmental politics, policy, and ideologies. More critical research perspectives were much fewer in these early years, such as cultural, ethical, distributional, democratic, gender, consumer, market, and economic-structural aspects as well as issues concerning power, justice, and decision-making (Hedrén & Anshelm 1998).

Over time, however, ESS research has widened substantively to also embrace culture and identity, ethics, welfare distributional issues, gender, democracy and decision-making, and more recently socio-ecological resilience and societal transformation. ESS research has become enlarged to embrace research in pursuit of sustainable development more widely (Eckerberg et al. 2003). A similar development has taken place in “green humanities” with research groups, conferences, and research programs becoming devoted to improved understanding of how, for example, culture, norms, knowledge, the natural environment, and technology work and interact with each other (Nordlund 2016).

The Nordic Environmental Research Programme, financed by the Nordic Council of Ministers from 1993 to 1998 allocated funding to 15 Nordic-Baltic projects within its sub-program “Social Science Research on Environmental Policy Issues”, most of which were based within political science, but also some in economics, anthropology

and history. As mentioned above, the research networks that were initiated within this research also inspired the organization of regular NESS conferences. In parallel, a Nordic environmental strategy 1996–2000 was adopted by the Nordic Council of Ministers to support Nordic cooperation for nature protection and sustainable societal development.

Later however, when the Nordic Council of Ministers stated in 2003 that the Nordic region should become an international leader in research and innovation within ten years, no specific reference was made to environmental and sustainability topics, whilst forestry, agricultural research, and education were targeted as pioneering Nordic collaboration (Sennerby-Forsse 2003). Since then, Nordic cooperation has been channeled through NordForsk, an organization under the Nordic Council of Ministers that provides funding for and facilitates Nordic cooperation on research and research infrastructure. NordForsk has had some recent calls targeting ESS researchers among others, such as for green transitions, green growth, bioeconomy, sustainable urban development, and smart cities.

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The emergence of ESS research varies among the Nordic countries. In Denmark, the Strategic Environmental Research Programme from 1992–2001 was supported by the Minister of Environment Svend Auken but ended quite abruptly with a change of government. It was organized around 16 interdisciplinary sub-programmes, each targeting a common research aim, problem, and approach as formulated by practitioners and researchers together and being composed of researchers from different institutes. One of its sub-programmes “Society and Culture” was composed of three

research centres, of which the largest was the Centre for Social Science Environmental Research with 50 researchers from nine institutes, dominated by environmental politics and environmental law. In 1997, sociologists and psychologists were added to this centre to research consumption and behaviour. Two other ESS centres were also active largely within the economic sciences. The centres helped to establish research collaborations across disciplines and put a large emphasis on dialogue with practitioners. A notable experience from this collaborative research endeavour was, however, that the leadership for the Society and Culture Programme (predominantly from the technical and natural sciences) had high expectations of interdisciplinary collaboration within the social sciences, which proved to be difficult to achieve in practice due to fundamental epistemological and methodological differences between the participating ESS disciplines (Lundgren et al. 2002, 50–51).

Another Danish research centre ‘Humans and Nature’ was funded by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities already at the end of the 1980s. Moreover, a research centre focusing on Sustainable Land Use, particularly the historic development of cultural landscapes, became funded within the above-mentioned Society and Culture Programme in 1997. Those initiatives spurred networking across the relevant human science disciplines and different institutes, also outside Denmark. More recently, however, Danish ESS researchers have had to rely heavily on EU rather than national or Nordic funding, which has also implied tighter bonds with European research networks beyond the Nordic.

In Norway, where there is only one Research Council, the bulk of ESS research is funded mainly through strategic calls while ‘free’ disciplinary research has a much smaller funding window. A new generation of environmental research began in 1996, inspired by Gro Harlem Brundtland’s *Our Common Future*, with the Programme for Research and Documentation for a Sustainable Society (ProSus) which since the year 2000 continues as part of Centre for Development and the Environment (SUM) at Oslo University. Several other initiatives geared towards ESS were also launched in 1996, such as the Programme for Sustainable Production and Consumption and



Keynote speakers James Meadowcroft and Josephine Mylan enjoying coffee with professor Yrjö Haila at NESS 2017 in Tampere.

Societal Conditions and Instruments for Norwegian Energy and Environmental Policy (SAMRAM). The SAMRAM continued after 2000 in the form of a strategic programme at the Norwegian Research Council called RAMBU, with particular responsibility for ESS research. When RAMBU ended in 2006 its societal research focus became integrated into the Norwegian Environmental Research Towards 2015 (Miljø 2015) programme. An evaluation of RAMBU showed that although the programme had targeted ESS quite broadly, the bulk of funded projects, totalling 45 MNOK (about 3,8 MEuro) became concentrated around policy instruments and resource management<sup>4</sup>, while the 'Landskap I endring' programme 2000-2006 took up cultural aspects of sustainable land use. It is noted that the ESS research landscape in Norway differs from the other Nordic countries in that much of the ESS research is carried out in research institutes outside the university sector, for example in the Centre for Climate Research (CICERO), Transportøkonomisk Institutt (TØI) and Fritiof Nansen Institute (FNI)<sup>5</sup> which depend heavily on the availability of external research funding.

More recently, the Norwegian Research Council (in parallel to what has happened in Finland and

Sweden) has focused its calls on societal challenges rather than ESS research per se, which puts pressure on social science and humanities researchers to collaborate with other disciplines in larger constellations, often requiring the inclusion of various target groups, public agencies and businesses in research design. Many ESS researchers have become more specialised in, for example, climate and energy issues since these areas have opened larger funding opportunities. Hence, large and transdisciplinary research collaborations aiming at finding practical solutions to societal and environmental problems have become prioritised, such as in the Programme for Environmental Research for a Green Transition (MILJØFORSK) from 2016. This, in turn, has diminished the possibility of more critical research perspectives, which we will discuss further in the next section.

In Sweden, a major ESS research programme targeting human and social sciences was launched in 1996 called 'Roads to sustainability – behaviour, organisation, structures'. It was co-financed by nine Swedish research councils and agencies with a budget of 50 MSEK (about 4,3 MEuro) – seen as a major effort at that time. This was an important investment for some selected senior and junior ESS

4 Rammebetingelser, styringsmuligheter og virkemidler innenfor bærekraftig utvikling, Sluttrapport RAMBU (2001-2007), Forskningsrådet/Norwegian Research Council 2009.

5 Eckerberg et al. (2015) Miljøinstituttene i Norge: Hovedrapport, Forskningsrådet/Norwegian Research Council.

scholars to build their research environments. Many additional ESS research programmes have been financed over the following years by 15–40 MSEK (1,3–3,4 MEuro) grants from The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation and by the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development (Formas), often also including researchers from the natural and technical sciences. In particular, the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research (MISTRA) has supported much larger-scale multidisciplinary programme research of strategic importance for a good living environment and sustainable development since its establishment in 1994, even though its share of ESS has been rather small, at least from the onset. Several government agencies, such as the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the Energy Agency have also funded ESS research as part of their applied research portfolio. The inclusion of various stakeholders in the research design has become an increasingly common prerequisite for funding, as is also the case in Norway. Swedish ESS researchers have to a lesser extent searched for EU funding than their counterparts in Denmark, Norway, and Finland, possibly due to the availability of many more national funding opportunities in Sweden.

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The situation for ESS in Finland is already well covered by other chapters in this book. The emergence of ESS research follows a similar pattern as that in Norway and Sweden, possibly with more emphasis on sociologists and rural development experts as contributors (this is my personal observation not corroborated by statistics). Increased attention to social science (but to a lesser extent humanities) is prevalent in the Finnish national funding calls. Evidence from the Research Council of Finland (formerly the Academy of

Finland) suggests that the share of ESS research has increased substantially over the last ten years, ranging from 0,5 to 2,8 percent of the Academy's research budget, and particularly spurred by thematic calls by the Strategic Research Council. Some of the most recent calls "Keys to Sustainable Growth" (2018–2023), "Special RRF funding for research on key areas of green and digital transition" (2022), and "A Climate-Neutral and Resource-Scarce Finland" (2015–2021) have attracted the most ESS scholars, notably as collaborators in many interdisciplinary research endeavours.

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The early establishment of the Finnish network and the annual meetings arranged by the Finnish Society for Environmental Social Science (YHYS) is unique in the Nordic setting, as it is an interdisciplinary ESS research network rather than a route for bringing up environmental and sustainability issues in the regular disciplinary networks. The YHYS therefore constitutes a particular strength for ESS researchers in Finland.

In all Nordic countries, the tendency is clearly towards increased multi- and interdisciplinary calls for new environmental and sustainability research, frequently also requiring substantive stakeholder engagement. This follows the same pattern as within the EU to fund problem-oriented strategic research, aiming to resolve the current societal challenges. It is also evident that the amount of available funding for ESS research has increased dramatically over the last thirty years in all the Nordic countries except Denmark from 2001 onwards. At the same time, the number of Nordic ESS researchers has increased dramatically. An indicator of the firm establishment of ESS is that for some years there have been full professors in ESS research within all the Nordic countries. But with fewer environmental research

calls targeted specifically towards social science and humanities, ESS researchers must increasingly join forces with other disciplines to succeed in raising external funding. They must also become more skilled in formulating their research questions and project design in line with interdisciplinary and societal needs rather than in line with their disciplinary networks. This brings us to the last part of this chapter, namely what are the challenges ahead and what can be expected for ESS research in the near future?

#### ESS RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND ITS FUTURE

As for the challenges ahead for ESS researchers, much inspiration can be derived from an evaluation of Swedish social science research on sustainability issues in the period of 1998–2008 that was commissioned by six Swedish research funding institutes (O'Brien et al. 2010). There had been a five-fold increase in support for Swedish social science research among those six funding institutions over the studied years and therefore a need to give guidance on its future support. The evaluation showed that there had been a rapid increase in funding for topics such as climate and energy, ecosystem management, environmental economics, and general policy tools as compared to more modest increases in funding for other discipline-focused areas. Not surprisingly, similar patterns could be traced in the design of workshop agendas of NESS Conferences, except for environmental economics largely having been absent in NESS (but the NESS Conference in Aarhus in 2001 explicitly targeted environmental economics)<sup>6</sup>.

The highly competent international evaluation team pointed at some general structural factors – or ‘mismatches’ – that may limit or even inhibit the social science contributions. These insights are often relevant still today, and well beyond Sweden, which is why I repeat them here for further reflection and potential mediation (see the Box below). For a more in-depth discussion of these issues, please study the evaluation report which is available online (O'Brien et al. 2010).

Despite the inherent problems listed in the report, the future of ESS research in the Nordic countries is likely to be generally positive. The societal challenges of addressing climate change and multiple natural resource and environmental problems will not go away, and ESS research is generally seen as an integral part of finding viable and legitimate solutions and inputs to address the many societal challenges. There is comparatively high trust in the Nordic countries towards research-based decisions and evidence-based policy making which suggests that ESS research will remain an essential ingredient in building further knowledge. Moreover, the international environmental and climate policy developments, including the European Green Deal, put pressure on the research agenda for ESS research topics to be included even if the natural and technical sciences still get a much larger share. EU funding is therefore likely to continue to stress ESS research as part of its content. It is also encouraging to find that ESS research has become mainstream within political science, sociology, economics, and some other disciplines including the humanities. Also, there are already a great number of well-established ESS researchers in all the Nordic countries who will push for those subjects to be included in relevant educational programmes.

But there are also some darker clouds on the horizon for future ESS research. Universities and research institutes in all the Nordic countries are suffering from fewer public resources for bottom-up driven research, as formulated by the researchers rather than by top-down priorities, which leads to high dependency on external funding that is increasingly based on strategic calls. As noted earlier, requirements for obtaining such funding are becoming more and more detailed, asking for transdisciplinarity and solution-based research. This development steers ESS research even further into some of the ‘mismatch’ problems described by O'Brien et al (2010). When social scientists and humanities scholars are seldom allowed to formulate research questions, more critical

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that there are frequent Nordic conferences for economists focussing on environmental issues. For example, the 13th International Conference of the European Society for Ecological Economics was organized in 2019 in Turku/Åbo, the 29th Ulvön Environmental Economics Conference took place in 2023 in Sweden and a series of Nordic environmental economy workshops are taking place <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/conferences/fifth-nordic-annual-environmental-and-resource-economics-naere-workshop>.



**Table 1: Mismatches in the research landscape, from O'Brien et al. 2010, 28–29.****MISMATCH 1 (AGENDA DEFINITION)**

arises when the social science agenda is explicitly or implicitly defined by the natural sciences, or when it is narrowly defined in terms of implementing policy. Mismatches also arise when non-social scientists evaluate proposals submitted by social scientists in response to seemingly open calls.

**MISMATCH 2 (LACK OF INNOVATION)**

occurs when funding increases, but when there is no change in the type of research or in the sorts of approaches that are supported. Research funds increase but there is no novelty because funders all support research framed in terms of the same paradigms.

**MISMATCH 3 (QUALITY VERSUS RELEVANCE)**

becomes an issue when funders expect researchers to generate new and challenging ideas (in terms of scale, innovation, interdisciplinarity, engaging with the big questions of sustainability etc.) and produce high quality publications, whilst also meeting narrowly instrumental interpretations of relevance.

**MISMATCH 4 (LIMITED VIEW OF RELEVANCE)**

results when interpretations of 'relevance' and utility are confined to instrumental or managerialist forms of problem-solving, and when there is little scope for thinking much more broadly about where these agendas come from, or how knowledge circulates through public debates, policy, and academia.

**MISMATCH 5 (IMBALANCED FOCUS)**

occurs when social science on sustainability becomes so strongly associated with commissioned consultancy work that scientists not yet involved in the field are wary of pursuing a career in this direction.

**MISMATCH 6 (LIMITED INTERACTIONS)**

arises when academic researchers have limited experience or expertise in seeing how their research might inform or usefully challenge non-academic actors, including policy-makers, NGOs, civil society, and businesses. This is a particular problem when networks and opportunities for interaction do not naturally exist, and when there are few incentives to build them.

**MISMATCH 7 (CAREER TRAJECTORIES)**

arises because career structures in Sweden are such that many young researchers, at just the moment when they might be challenging disciplinary boundaries and producing innovative, cutting-edge work, find themselves constrained by the hierarchical academic system, competing for relatively short-term grants on topics that are either not of their own making, or that have to be cast in terms that emphasise immediate relevance. Systems that should encourage and empower new talent have the opposite effect.

**MISMATCH 8 (LACK OF ENGAGEMENT)**

occurs when there are strong expectations or requirements for user-engagement despite the fact that non-academic communities have limited capacity to interact with social science knowledge in its own terms.

approaches, large-N comparative studies, in-depth international comparisons, as well as theory-building ESS research has less chance of becoming funded. Still, critical perspectives that extend the prevailing ontological assumptions that inform how we make sense of, and respond to a rapidly changing environment are also needed (Lövbrand et al. 2015). As Gulbrandsen (2021) argues, including powerful sectoral and economic interests in the research

process risks inhibiting research questions that challenge such interests and that might question prevailing power structures.

The recruitment of undergraduate and graduate students in ESS subjects and programmes has largely followed the fluctuating waves of public awareness and media attention to environmental issues in the past, so this might be a challenge to keep steady. Recruitment of PhD students within Nordic ESS

research might become increasingly difficult since Nordic ESS-orientated empirical studies normally presume good skills in the relevant Nordic language, and many PhD applicants nowadays tend to come from outside Nordic countries. On a more general level, polarisation in the public debate and widespread denial of research facts in social media could also prevent some students, as well as ESS researchers, from staying in academia when their knowledge is being questioned. Some of these challenges are, however, not confined to ESS research as such but are more general developments in academia.

Hopefully, the already existing national ESS research networks, as well as the NESS legacy, will however remain active and counteract these problems. There should therefore be an important role for NESS to play also in the future, even if there are many more interdisciplinary conferences around Europe and globally to choose from than thirty years ago. For young ESS scholars such meeting points are especially needed to help them in qualitative improvements of their research plans and draft papers as well as to build their future networks with like-minded scholars. Discussing with peers who understand the research questions and methodologies used is still vital to the future advancement of ESS research.

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