Tackling climate change
Low carbon energy technology

Helping developing countries deploy low carbon energy technologies is a crucial part of tackling climate change. Research led by the Sussex Energy Group assessed the barriers to the transfer of low carbon technology between developed and developing countries. Their recommendations directly shaped the government’s priorities for the international agreement on climate change and the Chilean and Indian governments have sought their advice for policies towards technology transfer.

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The ESRC is an independent organisation and receives most of its funding through the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
WE ARE LIVING in critical times for Britain and for the world as a whole. Even climate change, which has forced itself to the front of international attention in recent years, and which calls for immense changes in human behaviour, is only one of the vital issues which we now face. Others include food and water security, our growing use of natural resources, political change around the world and in Britain, and of course the problems of our economic future.

We believe that scientific evidence is the key to coping with these issues. Without it, it will not be possible for governments, businesses, non-profit organisations or indeed individuals to think about the problems we face, and to find the way through them.

Britain in 2010 is the fourth in a series of annual publications in which the ESRC uses the research it supports to illustrate the change that the country faces, and to point to evidence that might help the country to solve its problems and make the most of its opportunities. We believe that the insights it offers are valuable, and we know that they are fascinating.

The stories that we tell here illuminate many of the country’s most pressing crises. For example, we know that climate change increases flood risks for many areas of Britain. But ESRC researchers are using innovative research methods to show for the first time what happens to a household when it falls victim to flooding. They find that the problems really begin after the waters recede. But while the research we support shows that adapting to and mitigating climate change are big challenges, we also find an opportunity for British business to produce the low-carbon technology that the rest of the world will want to buy a decade from now.

Climate change is only one of the global threats to which social science can help us respond. Another is epidemic disease, including the recent bird and swine flu strains. ESRC research is showing us ways to improve our response to these diseases. Viruses can cross the world in hours, and because they are communicated between people, human behaviour is the key to slowing their spread.

The world economic crisis that began in 2008 has not yet run its course. But it has engendered deep thinking among economists and others about what went wrong and what happens next. In addition, the rapid growth of the BRIC nations of Brazil, Russia, India and China means that the UK economy will be a very different creature in a few years from the one we know today. This is a challenge for investors and policymakers. But it also poses issues for economics research and for the social sciences in general. They provide the knowledge we need to reshape British institutions to cope with the rapid change that we know is inevitable.

Not all change in the modern world is for the worse. Science and technology are advancing at an ever-growing pace, and will produce solutions to many of the biggest problems that we face today. But the social sciences are vital if we are to use these discoveries wisely. Our work is showing how young people actually use the internet and social media, how technologies such as robotics become socially acceptable, and how nuclear power might revive as an energy option.

Britain in 2010 proves that the social sciences have an immense impact on the societies that they observe. We hope you enjoy it, and we welcome your response via our editor at britain@esrc.ac.uk.

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