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Towards evidence-informed decision-making

THE THREE-YEAR Science Advice Initiative of Finland (Sofi) project was launched jointly by Finland's four academies of science (Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, Finnish Society of Science and Letters, Finnish Academy of Technical Sciences, and the Swedish Academy of Engineering Science in Finland) at the beginning of 2019. It is being coordinated by the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, with Academician Risto Nieminen as its responsible director.

The main purpose of Sofi is to draw up by the end of 2021 a proposal for a new science advice mechanism in Finland. Sofi also fosters dialogue between the scientific community and those responsible for political decisions and it stimulates discussions within society at large on the future of science advice.

The timing of this initiative is politically highly propitious. The programme announced by the government of Antti Rinne and subsequently Sanna Marin promised policies that are evidence-informed. The

importance of science has also been recognized recently by the EU, where the new chairman of the Commission appointed in 2019, Ursula von der Leyen, has indicated that its activities should be evidence-informed.

VITAL NETWORKS

Dialogue and cooperation are the cornerstones of Sofi. The work carried out in the first year was devoted to documenting experiences, expectations and hopes of the various parties involved in cooperation between the scientific community and political decision-makers. By the beginning of 2020 discussions had been held with roughly 250 experts in this field, and a systems analysis had been made of the current state of science advice in Finland. Sofi representatives have also visited the country's universities to discuss ongoing activities and to listen to views and ideas put forward by administrators, staff and students.



Nanna Särkkä, Content Producer (left), and Jaakko Kuosmanen, Academy Secretary, were employed by the Science Advice Initiative (Sofi) project.

Sofi also arranged discussion meetings for members of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters and conducted a survey in spring 2019. A large number of replies were received and an encouraging number of people expressed interest in science advice and in the project's activities. In practice, members have played a significant role in Sofi's activities as mentors, advisors, members of the steering committee or collaborators.

Sofi representatives have benchmarked science advice models in a wide variety of countries and have taken part in discussions in international arenas, e.g. at the ESAF-INGSA conference in Dublin, at the Whatworks Network meeting in Mexico and by visiting the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Contacts with European organizations such as EASAC, SAPEA, SAM and Allea have been established.

In November 2019 Sofi gathered science advice actors from all over Europe at a symposium entitled "The Future of Science Advice in Europe". The event was organized jointly with SAPEA in Helsinki. Among the speakers were the vice-chairman of the European Commission's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors, Pearl Dykstra, the head of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Wim van Saarloos, and the head of the EU Joint Research Centre, David Mair.

EXPERIMENTATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Sofi's work involves developing and testing various science advice models. For example, the first pilot schemes set up in autumn 2019 were aimed at testing:

- executing a Rapid Evidence Review on an emerging complex phenomenon (case study: impacts of the digital media among young people),
- contextualisation of an international evidence synthesis to Finnish policy discussions (case study: EASAC report on Decarbonisation of Transport), and
- science sparring, focusing creating a dialogue between decision-makers and rapid scientific task forces (case study: climate impact evaluation).

In addition to pilot schemes of this kind, two development projects have been started within the scope of Sofi. The first is aimed at systematically compiling a glossary of Finnish terminology connected with science advice, together with definitions. Science advice is a sufficiently new topic in Finland and the related terms are still not properly established. The work is carried out in collaboration with the National Terminological Databank.

The second project addresses the problem that in order to make use of experts in various fields the experts first have to be identified. This project therefore sets out to examine factors that either assist or hamper the process of finding experts via given networks and to look for means of improving the situation.

The work will continue in 2020 in the form of the present pilot studies and certain new ones. The staff of the Sofi project wish to thank all those people and organizations that have contributed comments, ideas and proposals for further development and to emphasize that they are eager to receive more (addressed to sofi@acads-ci.fi, for example).



*In November, 130 highly qualified experts from various parts of Europe working in science, administration and other fields interacting with these gathered at the National Museum of Finland for a symposium entitled *The Future of Science Advice in Europe* arranged by the Sofi project and SAPEA. Photo: Tomi Setälä*



The head of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, Wim van Saarloos, and the vice-chairman of the European Commission's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors, Pearl Dykstra, assessing the current situation and future prospects regarding science advice in Europe in a panel discussion chaired by Professor Marja Makarow. Photo: Tomi Setälä