

Strategic Research Council's theme proposals for 2021 programmes

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I Theme proposal: Demographic change – causes, consequences and solutions

This theme seeks research-based solutions for adapting to changes in the population's age structure and maintaining the functional and renewal capacity of society. The Finnish population is ageing, birth rates are declining, and the number of working-age people is decreasing. The decline in the birth rate and the ageing of the population will comprehensively challenge the institutional structures of society from working life to democracy. They will affect family structures, social relationships and life stages, both the need for and the supply of services and the resources available. Pension, health and social expenditure will increase, tax revenue will decrease, the dependency ratio will deteriorate. What will our welfare state look like in a different Finland with a changed age structure?

In order to safeguard the future of the welfare society, it is essential to examine how demographic changes will shape the Finnish society and how the changes can be adapted to and influenced. In particular, it is relevant to analyse not only the consequences but also the underlying causes of the phenomenon of declining birth rates. Individual research and interaction projects under this theme can examine the overall changes in the population's age structure or dig deeper into more limited phenomena. By means of multidisciplinary and interactive research, the projects can focus on themes such as declining birth rates, the decrease in the number of working-age people or the rise in the ageing population. The perspective can be limited to, for example, the services and funding base of the welfare state, working life and the future of work, international and internal migration or family relationships, and the gendered effects of these. The worsening demographic dependency ratio will change both the demand for and availability of welfare and care services. In addition to the population becoming older, generations change internally. In order for the social structures and practices to better reflect the current situation, it is also essential to examine the changes within age groups. For example, an ever-increasing proportion of 65–80-year-olds are functional and relatively healthy. Today's society, however, recognises this group mainly as pensioners. How could society's structures and working life be more open to the multigenerational population/workforce and the diverse skills of people of different ages? How can we strengthen good demographic relations as well as understanding and cooperation between people at different stages of their lives, from working life to private life? Co-creation with stakeholders both enables new types of research questions and promotes the implementation of necessary measures.

II Theme proposal: Biodiversity loss: Linkages to environment and society

This theme focuses on biodiversity as a prerequisite for wellbeing and on how the loss of biodiversity can be halted and ecosystems revived through research-informed solutions. The functional capacity of our society and the viability of our environment are built on biodiversity and on functional ecosystems. Although biodiversity itself has been extensively studied both in Finland and globally, and although measures have been taken, we have not been able to stop biodiversity loss. How can we halt the loss of biodiversity? Are we already familiar with all relevant impacts of human activities on biodiversity? And what are the environmental and social linkages of biodiversity loss?

The identification and implementation of the measures required to halt biodiversity loss and to reverse it require multidisciplinary and interactive research. Individual research and interaction projects can focus on more specific issues. Projects under this theme can, for example, examine how the loss of biodiversity affects the institutions of our society, the economy, health, culture, economic structures, production chains, regional policy and land use, or even what impacts it has on people's physical and psychological wellbeing. Balancing between ecological, social and economic sustainability involves trade-offs. How can a fair transition to a more sustainable society in terms of biodiversity be facilitated, and what is possible at the political level? What are the obstacles to and social conflicts in the implementation of protection measures, and how can they be resolved? What are the most significant challenges from the viewpoint of market incentives and regulation? Individuals and local communities can have strong linkages to biodiversity, and therefore the necessary measures also require knowledge of culture, communities and practices. Co-creation both enables new lines of inquiry and promotes the conservation and revitalisation of biodiversity. Biodiversity loss is a global problem. Research funded under this theme is therefore also linked to the global context. Although the theme focuses particularly on biodiversity, the research must also take into account, where possible, the combined impact of sustainable development measures.

III Theme proposal: Pandemics as a societal challenge

This theme focuses on the crises caused by pandemics and their wide-ranging social impacts. Anticipation and prevention of pandemic crises, safeguarding the functioning of society, decision-making on measures to be taken and post-crisis reconstruction require comprehensive research-based solutions. As the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic shows, the prevention of pandemic threats and securing the carrying capacity of healthcare may require not only medical and public health measures but also extensive societal measures and restrictions. Such measures may require decision-making with insufficient information and making tough choices between potentially incommensurable factors. The consequences are far-reaching, for example in social, health and economic terms, both for individuals and for the wider society. How do we safeguard the Finnish welfare society from pandemics and support the post-crisis recovery?

Research under this theme will create research-based solutions and multidisciplinary expertise to solve the societal challenges posed by pandemics, promoting the core tasks, operational security and citizen security of the welfare state. The objective of the theme is to strengthen the ability and capacity of Finnish society to anticipate and act in crises caused by pandemics. Individual research and interaction projects can focus on a more limited phenomenon. The research can address the individual and societal risks caused by pandemics, anticipation and prevention of risks, preparedness for pandemics or different ways of resolving them. The research may focus on, for example, maintaining the basic functions of the state, maintaining operational security and security of supply, safeguarding the carrying capacity of the healthcare system, maintaining the welfare state, issues related to individual rights, changes in values and attitudes, impacts on equality and non-discrimination, people's coping mechanisms at different lifecycle stages, or promoting a sense of security and social trust. Resolving the challenges in line with the Sustainable Development Goals requires flexibility, and an ability to recover and renew. The question of the role of the nation state as part of the global system will also rise to new light. Although the theme focuses on the Finnish society, the problems are global – their resolution also requires a cross-border perspective from the nation state. It is also essential to analyse and anticipate changes in Finland's internal and external security environment in order to support the handling of acute crises. Co-creation with stakeholders both enables new ways to approach the challenge and promotes the implementation of necessary measures.

Cross-cutting priority: Wellbeing

The cross-cutting priority for the 2021 strategic research programmes is wellbeing. Wellbeing is a key part of a good life. Wellbeing can be interpreted broadly from the viewpoint of individuals, communities or society, for example, but also as the wellbeing of animals or, for instance, habitats. In an individual research and interaction plan, wellbeing can be emphasised from the perspective appropriate to the project in question. How should wellbeing be understood in the context of the project concerned? How can wellbeing be maintained and promoted? The aim is to include a wellbeing perspective in research and interaction activities across the board, starting from the target setting.