

Oslo, 1st September 2023

Response from PRIO to consultation on role and function of RCN

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) thanks the Ministry of Education and Research for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on the role and function of the Research Council of Norway (RCN) for Norway's research system, in connection with the ministry's ongoing work on a white paper on the research system (cf. consultation letter dated 12th June 2023).

PRIO is an independent research institute, founded in 1959. Our mission is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The RCN is an important actor in the research system for PRIO: PRIO receives a core grant under the Norwegian government's guidelines for public basic funding for research institutes, a scheme currently administered by the RCN; and a substantial proportion of PRIO's R&D activity is funded by grants from the RCN.

The place of the RCN in the research system is consequently an issue of central importance for PRIO. The following are some brief remarks in response to the questions outlined in the ministry's consultation letter:

- The most important value-added of channelling the allocation of research funding through the RCN – i.e. a single, integrated government agency with allocation of research funding as its core mandate – is that this provides a **cohesive national platform** for research funding, where the transparency of the process is relatively high, the application system is clear and functional and reporting systems are cost-effective. It is clearly beneficial for researchers in Norway seeking funding for research projects to be able to engage with an agency of this kind, as opposed to an

array of different (e.g. subject-specific) funding agencies or a more variegated funding agency with a broader remit than research.

- It is important for researchers and research-performing organisations in Norway that the RCN continues to provide **funding for curiosity-driven basic research**, as there are no other major sources of funding for this kind of research in the Norwegian system. Supporting basic research is essential for building the **strong, long-term research environments** that are needed to provide the knowledge we need to tackle complex societal challenges, including **currently unforeseen challenges**. That there are competitive national arenas for the allocation of funding for basic research ensures that innovative, interdisciplinary, impact-orientated research milieus outside the university and college sector, such as PRIO, can also make vital contributions in these areas.
- The RCN is an important source of **flexible funding for large-scale research projects**. Large-scale funding is important, again, from the perspective of building strong basic-research environments as a foundation for tackling complex societal challenges. But it is also an **efficient way to utilise researchers' time**, matching the substantial transaction costs of the application and evaluation process with similarly substantial gains in terms of funded research activity. The flexibility of RCN funding, especially for larger initiatives, allows for a natural (and desirable) development of research initiatives over time.
- One issue that the RCN needs to address is the **lack of regular increases to the financial frames** for projects, especially researcher projects. Given the rate of inflation, this lack of progression in budget frames means that the same substantial proposal development and evaluation process is ultimately **resulting in less research**, which is not an efficient use of public resources. Project financial frames need to be regularly adjusted in order to correct for this effect.
- Another issue is the **quality and predictability of the evaluation process**. We appreciate how difficult it can be to find peer reviewers, and that there is a limit to how precisely the expertise of a reviewing panel can match the specialisations of particular proposals. Nevertheless, many researchers in Norway appear to be concerned about the quality of the evaluations their proposals receive, and feel that these do not always indicate clearly how a proposal can be improved in order to

reliably improve its score if resubmitted. In the long term, this feeling of unpredictability of results and variable quality of feedback runs the risk of undermining trust in the RCN's role in the research system.

We hope this input will make a useful contribution to the ministry's work and look forward to participating in coming rounds of consultation on the research system in Norway.

Kind regards,

David J. Allen
Senior Adviser
PRIO