

PRESS RELEASE

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For more information and for interviews:

SATORI press office

NAME: Mr. Jørgen Madsen, Senior Project manager

E-mail: jm@tekno.dk

Mobile: +45 30 78 51 68

<http://www.satoriproject.eu>

A common practice in ethics assessment is possible, but we need to pay attention to differences between cultures

Most countries and organizations that engage, fund or support research and innovation have procedures to evaluate the ethical acceptability of planned projects and activities. Such evaluations are often called ethics assessment. A major report on the international differences in research cultures, ethical standards and legal frameworks investigated the similarities and differences of cultural value systems on a global scale and in selected European countries and their impact on ethics assessment. The results are issued by the SATORI Project, supported by the European Commission through its FP7 funding scheme.

The values expressed by a society could play a crucial role in shaping the future of research and innovation. Differences in values shifts research interests toward what a society considers more acceptable and desirable. Value differences between countries influence research priorities and the norms and laws related to the development of research and new technologies. The SATORI project investigated the values related to science, research and innovation in the different countries, including Europe, Asia, North and South America and Africa. The aim was to understand whether the harmonisation of practices of ethics assessment is possible and desirable. The report detailing our research is freely available online: <http://satoriproject.eu/media/D3.2-Int-differences-in-ethical-standards.pdf>

The SATORI project, comprising 17 partner institutions from 12 countries, conducted more than 230 interviews and reviewed the literature on value systems, international frameworks and regulatory structures related to ethics assessment in research and innovation (R&I).

“We expected to see many differences between value systems, and we did find that certain values found stronger support in some countries and cultures than in others. However, we did not find any differences between value systems that would categorically hinder the harmonisation of practices in ethics assessment, which is the final goal of our project”, explains Philip Brey, professor of Philosophy of technology at University of Twente (NL) and coordinator of the SATORI project. He argues that there definitely are significant divergences in values between societies, for example between those whose values are traditional-religious and those that are rational-secular, but that such differences have not been shown in practice to interfere in a major way with the alignment of ethics assessment practices between countries. Democratic practices and corruption were two of the major challenges to a harmonisation of ethics assessment practices. It seems therefore, that challenges to ethics assessment are mainly socio-economical and political.

The importance of economic and political stability

Most differences between value systems significantly depend on non-moral factors such as a country's economic development. However, differences between traditional-religious and secular-

rational values seem to be more embedded in the moral-cultural background of societies. The SATORI project discovered one of the most significant implications of moral-cultural differences in countries background is the different balance between the individual and the common good.

One of the main conclusions of the analysis is that political stability and economic prosperity have major impacts on value systems. “Therefore, the success of a global framework for ethics assessment depends also on political and economic stability”, says Brey.

The role of governments

There is an increasing need for ethics assessment, because ethics intersects the major global problems humans face and the attempts to find possible solutions to them. Forced migration, climate change, huge inequalities in life chances, threats to biodiversity are matters imbued with ethical dilemmas and challenges. In this context, the ethical dimensions of research in general, and emerging technologies in particular, need to be carefully considered, assessed and evaluated. Therefore, when stakes are high and controversial issues are discussed, the knowledge and understanding of the underlying values and norms are crucial for all actors in society. This is even more important for collective decision making, which needs to be based on the best available knowledge. This is why research and innovation are called to be more and more “responsible”, and driven by the needs of the society and by ethical principles and norms that many European countries are setting up.

The SATORI research indicates that a significant challenge is to strike a balance between countries with philosophical traditions that prefer strong government involvement in regulating ethics and ethics assessment and the ones that prefer less government involvement and decentralised processes. The preferred role of the government can have strong implications for the way ethics assessment practices are organised.

Each field has its framework

The report also offers an overview of the international frameworks and regulatory differentiations in different fields such as in human rights, environment, data protections and good practices in research.

For example, the biomedical ethics assessment and legal framework is one of the most developed. It provides standards for carrying out research on human subjects. The same framework regulates sociologists and psychologists, when they conduct research that involves humans. The biomedical framework also offers a model to tackle the scientific integrity, responsible conduct of research and dual-use issue. The framework places an obligation on researchers to prevent any potential misuse of their work. Therefore, the framework can constitute a model for further developments in other, less structured, fields.

Each sector applies ethics in a different way and for different purposes. Environmental sciences apply ethics referring to the precautionary principle, according to which when there is a possible serious threat to the environment, special countermeasures shall be taken. The aim is to protect the environment for both present and future generations, to guarantee the rights to information and participation in decision-making relating to environmental issues, and to regulate impact assessments in environmental sciences.

In the light of the results of the research, the report concludes that any common ethical framework should leave room for flexible interpretations of the main principles involved in ethics assessment in research and innovation.

SATORI press office

NAME: Mr. Jørgen Madsen, Senior Project manager

e-mail: jm@tekno.dk

mobile: +45 30 78 51 68

On behalf of the SATORI team coordinated by the University of Twenty

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The report at a glance

The report focusses on the differences between countries in values and in the interpretation of international legal and regulatory frameworks. Its overall aim is to investigate what these differences are and what they may mean for the prospects of international harmonisation of ethics assessment of research and innovation. The report consists of two main parts. In part I, *Differences in Value Systems in Europe and the World*, a comparative study is undertaken of values and value systems that prevail in different countries and regions in the world, with special emphasis on EU countries. The emphasis is on moral values. It then investigates what implications the comparative analysis has for the harmonisation of ethics assessment across the EU and across the world. This study is possibly unique as an empirically based, comparative analysis of moral values and principles across the world.

Part II, *International Frameworks and Regulatory Differentiation*, aims to analyse international legal and regulatory frameworks that have a particular relevance for ethical assessment, such as general human rights frameworks, frameworks on good research practice, biomedical ethical frameworks, environmental frameworks, biological and chemical weapons conventions and data protection frameworks. It analyses what values they are based on, what norms they prescribe and how widely they are supported. It then goes on to analyse how they fit with national legislation and regulation in selected countries, and determines where there is a good fit and where not, and why this is the case. This analysis makes it clear that international frameworks may not always fit well with national legislation and regulation, and that they can be interpreted very differently in different countries. To know how and why this is the case will be very helpful in developing frameworks and approaches for ethics assessment of R&I that can be used in the process of harmonisation. The report is available online: <http://satoriproject.eu/media/D3.2-Int-differences-in-ethical-standards.pdf>

About the SATORI Project

The SATORI project is a forty-five month project on ethics assessment of research and innovation (R&I) supported by the European Commission through its FP7 funding scheme. The SATORI project aims to support mutual learning about ethics assessment and ethical guidance in different fields, organisations and countries. The project strives to identify best practices, to support harmonisation and shared standards, and to develop common principles, protocols, procedures and methodologies for the ethical assessment of research and innovation in the European Union and beyond. The aim of this substantial research effort is to improve ethical assessment practices and strengthen respect for ethical principles in research and innovation. For more information, please see: <http://satoriproject.eu>