An Unconventional Solution to Social Ills

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Social scientists have hard job, and it's possible they have a harder job than engineers and physicists. At the very least, Dirk Helbing of ETH Zurich in Switzerland thinks that they're further behind.

"Today we are understanding a lot about our physical world and about our universe; also, we have invested a lot in understanding our environment," says Helbing, who is Scientific Coordinator of FuturICT. "But so far, there's a lack of understanding of social economic systems."

Social systems are hard to understand because they're immensely complicated. These systems depend on billions of individual persons and the billions of neurons in each individual's brain, not to mention communication devices such as computers and mobile phones. Political systems, environmental changes, and migration patterns — to name just a few — determine social outcomes, too.

Helbing and his colleagues want to solve social problems with the same technology used to solve more straightforward physical problems. With support from some of the most prominent institutions and scientists in the EU and beyond, FuturICT is working to create something similar to a "flight simulator" for social factors. If scientists are able to predict how probable events such as disasters and climate change will transform people's behavior and the dependent institutions, societies can be better prepared to mitigate complications such as crime, corruption, and financial meltdowns.

All things considered, it might be hard to determine which scientists have the toughest jobs. If FuturICT is successful, though, scientists with diverse skills and interests will help make the unforeseen twists and turns of our collective future a bit more navigable.