

Priority Research Program

Autonomy (Ageing & Disability)

What is a Priority Research Program (PPR)?

The priority research programs are part of the French government's future investment program (PIA)¹. Their objective is to allocate significant funding from the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation towards priority topics. According to Alain Schuhl, the Director General for Science at the CNRS, "the PPRs define scientific questions and devote significant resources to them over a long period of time, all to provide meaningful answers to the issues identified. The Autonomy PPR is the third one carried out by the CNRS, following the MOPGA² PPR, led by Stéphane Blanc³ – which was the result of a call in June 2017 by French President, Emmanuel Macron, to mobilize research in the fight against global warming. A third PPR, High Performance Sports, was launched in 2019 for the run-up to the future Paris Olympic and Paralympic Games of 2024; it is being led by Vincent Nougier⁴. A fourth PPR on the theme of oceans, jointly led by Ifremer⁵ and the CNRS, was also launched in 2021. Each PPR has a scientific board that agrees on a set of challenges and a program strategy.

The "autonomy" (ageing, disability) PPR: context, structure and management

While the Covid-19 pandemic has raised awareness surrounding the vulnerability of the elderly and the most fragile, it has also highlighted the impact of inequalities and the need for public intervention on their behalf. Following the 5th National Conference on Disability (CNH) in February 2020, a law on "Elderly people and autonomy" is in preparation. It is in this context that the government has asked the CNRS to pilot a new priority research program (PPR) on autonomy (aging, disability), financed with 30 million euros. This ambitious project, led by the CNRS in conjunction with other major organizations, including the INSERM, and in partnership with the ANR (French National Research Agency), will run from 2021 to 2026.

The Autonomy program is steered by an interdisciplinary scientific board comprised of 16 members and chaired by Claude Martin, sociologist and research director at the CNRS (UMR 6051, Arènes), assisted by Lydia Fenner, research engineer. Established on September 1, 2020, the scientific board brings together scientific figures from major French research organizations and from the scientific

¹ Initiated in 2010, the PIA Future Investment Program aims to increase French competitiveness by encouraging innovation.

² Make our Planet Great Again

³ Stéphane Blanc has been the director of the CNRS Institute of Ecology and Environment since March 1, 2021.

⁴ Vincent Nougier is a professor at Grenoble Alpes University and a researcher at the Medical Engineering and Complexity Laboratory (CNRS/Grenoble Alpes University).

⁵ The French Research Institute for Sea Exploitation (Ifremer) specializes in marine science and technology and is committed to sustainable development and open science. It conducts research, produces expertise and creates innovation to protect and restore the ocean, responsibly exploit its resources, share marine data and offer new services to stakeholders.

departments of organizations in the field of autonomy. Board members are all dedicated to defending interdisciplinarity while coming from a variety of disciplines such as law, epidemiology, sociology, philosophy, demography, public health, the biology of aging, political science and information science.

The interdisciplinary scientific board presided over by Claude Martin (research director CNRS, sociology) brings together the following members: Sandrine Andrieu (PUPH public health, social medicine), Marine Boisson-Cohen (scientific director, CNSA), Mokrane Bouzeghoub (PU information sciences, DAS interdisciplinarity CNRS), Pascale Breuil (economist and statistician, director of statistics, prospective and research CNAV), Emmanuelle Cambois (DR INED, demography), Vincent Caradec (PU sociology, University of Lille), Marie Gaille (DR CNRS, philosophy, DAS INSHS), Eric Gilson (PUPH biology of ageing, IRCAN), Agnès Gramain (PU economy, University Lorraine), Robert Lafore (PU law, Science Po Bordeaux), Anne Marcellini (professor of sociology, University of Lausanne), Jean-François Ravaud (DR Inserm, epidemiology), Yves Remond (PU material mechanics, engineering and systems sciences, University of Strasbourg), Isabelle Ville (research director EHES, sociology), Florence Weber (PU anthropology, ENS).

The PPR is also overseen by a program committee made up of stakeholder representatives in the field of autonomy, major research institutions and international experts.

Scientific objectives and challenges

Autonomy is a concept used in many sectors and disciplines. It is often thought of in connection with other concepts such as "care", "fragility", "dependence" or "vulnerability". This notion of autonomy refers to the ability to act, to make choices for oneself, or to the idea of self-determination. The promotion and maintenance of autonomy fundamentally depend on the environment of individuals and in particular on their social connections. While this program is primarily concerned with the challenges of advancing age and disability, its ambition is broader, as autonomy concerns everyone at some point in the life cycle, even if it draws the most attention when it is impaired or lost.

The goal of this program is to mobilize all disciplinary sectors, knowledge, devices and existing tools, which can facilitate people's autonomy. The ambition of this program is to contribute to the reinforcement of research structures and infrastructures in all fields related to autonomy and to identify some main challenges for action. It also aims at designing scientific developments conceived with and for those people concerned. The ambition to structure and strengthen research in this field requires the definition of a global strategy to gather, coordinate and make accessible a large quantity of relevant data, as well as a strategy of valorization and scientific activities to link together research sectors that are remain highly compartmentalized.

Priorities: A global data strategy and strengthened scientific leadership

The Scientific Advisory Board has formulated certain priorities for the program. The first is to design scientific developments with and for the populations concerned, which indicates accounting for the heterogeneity of these populations in terms of age, generations, health situations, environments and resources, but also to design a strengthened and sustainable scientific leadership. The second is to mobilize the resources of the PPR to strengthen the structures and infrastructures for research in the field of autonomy, starting with the question of data. New data are needed, but a large number of relevant data are available from a wide variety of sources, quantitative and qualitative, cohort data, and administrative data. After an inventory, the scientific board wishes to bring together researchers and specialists in official statistics to define a "global strategy", taking into account the identification

of difficulties and needs of the community in terms of production, access and processing of relevant data.

Four challenges

The first challenge of the program is to define autonomy and how to understand and measure it. The environments in which people live (their working and living conditions, the proximity of services, etc.) are likely to hinder their ability to act and decide for themselves. Understanding the meaning of autonomy according to different scientific approaches can allow research to investigate the social demands made on autonomy, and to better understand the obstacles that certain populations encounter in their efforts to meet these demands.

The second challenge is to study the design of public policies on autonomy on a national and international scale - not only policies specifically dedicated to autonomy, but also its links with other public policies, such as city, housing or education policies, and the actors involved, such as the public sector, family structures or nonprofit actors.

The third challenge questions the situations and experiences of empowerment and of reduced autonomy. The best way to understand the way in which current social transformations or certain life events impact the feeling of autonomy and being able to act and choose, is to specifically study the experiences of those people concerned, whether living with a disability or certain effects of aging. The goal is to think in terms of prevention and the developing living environments in order to better identify the environmental conditions of autonomy.

The fourth challenge concerns the design, reception and use of innovative devices and experiments in the field of environmental compensation, substitution and adaptation as well as human support regarding autonomy, particularly in the biomedical, social, technological, information and communication fields.

Program deployment

The Autonomy PPR will be deployed using three main instruments or forms of investment: investments in terms of support infrastructure for data coordination and scientific animation; calls for projects and calls for expressions of interest, in conjunction with the ANR.

The first operations of the PPR, concerning challenges 1 and 2 will be launched during the summer of 2021. This will be followed by the actions concerning challenges 3 and 4, which necessitate larger investments.

Throughout the PPR, the scientific board will draw on external counsel and opinions by calling on stakeholders in the field of autonomy and by consulting international experts with comparable research programs in their respective countries.