

Scientists and NGOs slam Commission's Research funding plans

29 June 2011 - In an open letter sent today to the President and Members of the European Commission as well as the European Parliament and the EU Member states, 98 civil society and research organisations from across Europe warn that the Commission's draft proposals for the next Research funding framework (2014-2020) fail to address the real challenges faced by European societies and call for a research agenda geared towards the needs of society and the environment rather than those of big business.

Today, the European Commission unveiled its post-2013 budget proposal, the Multiannual Financial Framework, which envisages a massive boost for the EU's next research funding programme. This new programme is proposed to have a €80 billion budget [TBC], about twice as much as the current framework programme (FP7) running until 2013.

But increasing a budget and improving a political strategy are two different things.

The signatories, an alliance of researchers (Scientists for Global Responsibility, European Network for Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility...) and civil society organisations (The European Consumers' Organisation, Friends of the Earth Europe, Statewatch, Women in Europe for a Common Future, Fondation Sciences Citoyennes...) caution that the EU's current excessive emphasis on market competitiveness could see commercially-driven investigations prioritised over needs- and curiosity-driven research in the next Common Strategic Framework.

(Quote from letter) "Research agendas that prioritize profit and market share are incapable of meeting the social and environmental challenges Europe is facing precisely because these challenges require alternatives to the high-growth, high-profit models of economic development".

The Commission's proposal would aggravate the already excessive corporate bias in the EU's current 'FP7' research programme, which has seen large companies and their lobbyists shape the EU research agenda and then secure the public funds on offer.

The issue is absolutely strategic. Adequately addressing social, economic and ecological injustice, loss of biodiversity, climate change, resource scarcity, the need to move towards a low-carbon society, public health issues etc. requires a significant shift of current European R&I policies away from a corporate-driven focus on competitiveness. Now more than ever, public research and innovation are needed to create knowledge and tangible solutions to the challenges Europe is facing. Letting corporate interests hijack this effort would be a cruel failure for the EU, and an unacceptable waste of public funds in the midst of an acute financial crisis.

(Quote from letter) "Research that will make Europe (and the world) an environmentally sustainable, healthy and peaceful place to live must now be prioritised over and above research that delivers marketable technologies."

With five key recommendations, the signatories call on the EU to:

- Overcome the myth that only complex, cost-intensive technologies can create employment and well-being;
- Adopt a wider definition of innovation to include locally adapted, socially relevant research projects;
- Establish a democratic, participatory and accountable decision-making process for research funding allocation, free from conflicts of interest and industry dominance;
- Base decisions on expertise independent from commercial interests, and from a balanced representation of all stakeholders;
- Ensure that the results of publicly funded research will be openly accessible to the wider society.

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