Research and REACH

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Believing that Europe's future more than ever depends on a high level of skills and innovation, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) gave its backing to the March 2000 Lisbon European Summit objectives.

This means that trade unions endorsed the European pledge to boost investment in research and development to 3% of GDP by 2010. Delivering this aim means pursuing proactive policies at both European and national level. Difficult economic times must not mean that the future goes by the board. But research and education are about more than the production and acquisition of new knowledge – they are fundamental to the economic, social and cultural development of our countries, and make an active contribution to increasing democracy.

Neither public nor private research, however, seems to be high on the government or business agenda. Public research is in a very shaky state, as can be seen from the resignations of 1000 research directors in France in March 2004. Commercial research is not hitting the targets set, is up against the growing influence of capital markets, and is often the first thing to go in cash-strapped firms.

Increased research also promotes job creation:
- direct jobs in research; jobs that need proper terms of employment, recognition and career prospects; and
- induced jobs created by research-driven innovation.

A closer look is needed at various areas that intersect these general problems of research and the challenges of the REACH project:
- bringing science closer to the public to achieve sustainable development;
- giving a new impetus to research through proactive measures in the European area;
- making jobs central to the Training – Research – Innovation triangle;
- making the case for a strong public research sector through cooperation with the private sector.

Bringing science closer to the public

The steadily-widening gap between science and the public must be closed to gain acceptance for substantial investment in research and credibility for its outcomes. Research can deliver fundamental rights and better access to basic items for all if it pays heed to social demand and respects a number of shared ethical principles.

Research and fundamental rights

We humans demand much of scientific research, but are also sceptical about its outcomes. We remember high-profile disasters, feel excluded from the benefits of science, or are directly affected by its unwanted effects. Younger people are disgruntled at the failure of scientific progress to deliver the expected jobs. The REACH project can and must address these questions and demands by providing more information to users and prompting them to make choices for a safe and sound environment through environment-conserving innovations.

Research, social demand and the precautionary principle

There is a real difficulty to creating social demand, which can reflect conflicting needs, and translating it into research issues. A new research governance is therefore needed which will take into account the demands of the different players in society (trade unions, but also voluntary organizations).

The precautionary principle has already become a benchmark in Europe, and European trade unions see it as a powerful guarantee for new research on big issues that are exercising society (GMOs, cloning, nuclear waste, stem cell research, homeopathy, etc.).

But the precautionary principle, which we see as positive, is not a principle of abstention. It must counsel prudent and responsible action when dealing with the unknown or uncertain.

Research and ethics

Research helps us to understand and address the big issues of our time and societal choices, especially food safety, experimentation on human beings, research on energy and global changes.

The players in civil society, especially the trade unions, must help leverage to the public the results of research in these big areas of social concern.

But the first place to address ethical issues is in the daily practice of research activities. The setting up of ethical committees open to civil society groups must be promoted.

These new approaches mean that research must properly accommodate the humanities and social sciences, and contribute to a real new governance of research and high-risk activities.

Proactive measures to give a new impetus to research

If Europe's future is dependent on innovation, investment in higher education and training and research is, along with collective bargaining, one of the main driving forces behind economic and social progress. So the agenda for today's Europe must be to develop company-funded research and innovation activity, and to create the conditions for a better interaction with public research. This means:

- clarifying the relations between public research and business with negotiated terms on patent ownership and exploitation;
- boosting the synergies between public and private research by increasing the number of combined laboratories and research partnerships;
- developing public research and higher education centres which, by brokering contract-based relations, will become a magnet for industrial and service activities;
- encouraging new innovative business creation, technology transfers, project promoters and venture capital investment in these firms;
- getting large firms to reintroduce the development of in-house research programmes into their strategies; and, at an industry level, consolidating vocational technology centres;
- transplanting the principles of transparency, prevention and responsibility into military research, because civil and military research cannot be mutually exclusive. This is a particular challenge for the scope of REACH.

Making jobs central to the Training – Research – Innovation triangle

The REACH project must be mainstreamed across education, life-long learning and upskilling policies to bring on quality jobs and work in research activities that, more than others, use potentially hazardous products and processes. This means:

- training workers in the skills for safe risk-taking inherent to research and innovation, and gaining recognition for these special skills in collective agreements;
- promoting credit for experience as another form of knowledge ownership, and hence creativity;
- reassessing the publicly-funded share of employment in R&D;
- assessing and taking account of how applied (or goal-directed) research in particular can contribute to improving working conditions and strengthening social dialogue.

Making the case for a strong public research sector

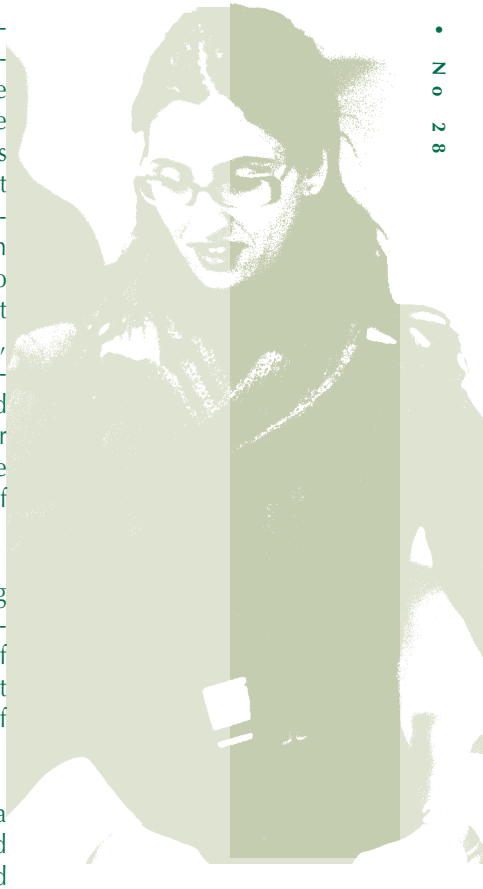
Science and technology are part and parcel of our cultural heritage on a par with other forms of cultural expression. Research must not be just about improving economic competitiveness. It must take ownership of fundamental aspects that do not yield immediate returns, but can be important in later uses (e.g., sequencing the human genome).

This is the first duty of public research, which also makes an essential contribution to cultural and social progress by helping to inform flashpoint issues, debates and the decisions of our political and economic decision-makers about the big issues involved in social changes.

The public research sector must also provide objective information to the public, produced and put in perspective by coming from multiple sources, and the independent expertise required for making informed choices (cf., asbestos in France).

In conclusion

The trade unions want immediate strong and tangible indications to be included in the future Community framework programme for R&D, and a re-evaluation of the bodies and procedures of the debate on science and the role of research in society. The European trade union movement sees research as part of its sustainable development strategy. Without research there can be no significant environmental approach, without research no bold approach to work and employment, without research no improvement in economic governance, and without innovation, no economic growth. European research, with its priorities as laid down in the sixth Community framework R&D programme (2002-2006) and forthcoming programmes, can therefore both foster implementation of the REACH system and promote synergies between REACH and the broad areas of innovation and development.



For research to be as we want it also means fulfilling conditions on the terms of employment and working conditions of research personnel. The future of research is not about a GDP-related budget, but also the quality and long-term future of the jobs of researchers and laboratory workers.

Addressing all these issues properly can give a strong signal to youth, employees, businesses, and researchers, to allay misgivings about science and technology, or doubts about the willingness of the different countries, Europe and some businesses to develop research.

The chemical industry is not under threat from asking the right questions about its own sustainability. Because chemistry is a fundamental science, more than a collection of technologies and techniques, it contains within itself and in cooperation with other disciplines, the mainsprings of its own sustained progress.

Confronting these new challenges, public and private research can construct a new paradigm of economic and social development. ■