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Public Research should benefit Society, not big business

An open letter on the Common Strategic Framework for EU research and innovation funding

The research that is prioritized and funded today will have a decisive impact on the future of our societies and our planet. It is imperative that the EU research framework is geared towards the needs of society and the environment rather than those of big business.

Our societies face immense ecological, social and economic challenges. It is certainly no time for "business as usual", and radical change is needed for society to address these challenges. Research and technology have a crucial role to play, but must - especially when publicly funded - benefit all sections of society.

In these rapidly changing times, research and innovation play a double role: they enable the broadening of knowledge and informed decision-making, but they also contribute to the emergence of problems. Research into nuclear energy, pharmaceuticals, agricultural genetic engineering, synthetic biology, nanotechnologies, space and military research – for example – has seen big business secure generous public subsidies despite widespread concern about their environmental and social impacts. This has marginalized and limited the funding available for research in important domains such as environmental protection, preventative health policy, organic and low-input agriculture, energy-saving and renewable energies, toxicology, water supply issues, and environmentally sustainable fisheries as well as for research in social sciences which contributes to social change and problem solving that are not focused on technological fixes.

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 that have been pursued to such devastating excess. European research should promote and focus on innovation that provides solutions rather than investing in end of the pipe technologies which do not tackle the root causes of the problems that society faces.

We are extremely concerned therefore that the Europe 2020 Strategy and the Innovation Union Flagship Initiative address Research and Innovation almost exclusively from the perspective of competitiveness. It envisages a society driven by technological 'fixes' instead of social-policy based solutions and threatens to impose an unacceptable corporate bias in the upcoming next EU framework research programme (2014-2020).

Many of the undersigned organizations, who work on a broad range of social, environmental and economic justice issues, have expressed their concern about the corporate bias in the EU's current 'FP7' research programme. We have highlighted problems such as industry-domination of European Technology Platforms (ETPs) and 'informal' agenda-setting bodies like the European Security Research and Innovation Forum. These channels create a structural conflict of interest by allowing industry lobbying to set the EU research agenda and then secure the public funds on offer. The more systematic use of public-private research partnerships envisaged by the European Commission will exacerbate these problems and undermine socially-driven innovation.

While the EU has funded research that seeks to explore and promote alternatives at the margins of its current programme (particularly in its Science and Society programme), we are concerned that these already limited opportunities will be further restricted in the coming programme.

Ethical concerns about many of the controversial technologies the EU is already funding have also been sidelined. The EU's ethical guidance and compliance mechanisms must be urgently overhauled to ensure that much needed debates about the impact of new technologies can be considered and addressed as part of the overall research agenda. The role of social sciences, particularly, should not be narrowed to facilitating the "acceptability" of technologies.

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. We, the undersigned civil society and scientific organisations, think that another research and innovation policy is not only possible but urgently necessary in order to respond to the challenges our societies are facing. We call on the EU Institutions to take steps to

- Overcome the myth that only highly complex and cost intensive technologies can create sustainability, employment and well-being, and focus on tangible solutions to environmental, economic and societal challenges instead.
- Ensure that the concept of innovation includes locally adapted and social forms of innovation as well as technological development, and facilitate cooperation and knowledge exchange between civil society organisations and academia in order to realise the innovative potential of the non-profit sector;
- Establish a democratic, participatory and accountable decision-making process for research funding allocation, free from conflicts of interest and industry dominance, and enable civil society to play a full part in both setting the EU research agenda and participating in all EU research programmes;
- Ensure that all experts advising EU research policy-makers are appointed in a transparent manner to provide impartial and independent expertise, free from conflicts of interests; replace industry-dominated advisory groups and technology platforms with bodies that provide a balanced representation of views and stakeholders;
- Ensure that publicly funded research benefits wider society by systematically requiring equitable access licensing and encouraging open source access policies in the next Common Strategic Framework.