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ISIS Report - June 10, 2001

Public Subsidy of Failed Corporate Science

The European Union is about to finalise Framework VI, its new funding programme for public research in member countries for the period 2002-2006. Anyone hoping for support of independent, socially accountable science will be sorely disappointed. It is a public subsidy for failed corporate science, and commits civil society to even more of the same [1]. **Dr. Mae-Wan Ho** reports.

The total budget involved is 16.27 billion Euros, an increase of 17% over the previous Framework V. The politicians, starting from the reigning EU president, represented by Carl Lindberg of Sweden to EC Commissioner Busquin, all stress that this funding programme constitutes only 5% of the research budget of EU countries overall. Nevertheless, they all say it plays a crucial role in structuring European research, in defining the overall aims of European science and facilitating collaborative and international mobility among scientists in Europe.

Unfortunately, the agreed draft just published shows all the signs of the corporate agenda. The goals are to enhance Europe's global "competitiveness", to boost "European added value", and if that were not enough, it explicitly states, "Business should be publicly funded if this provides incentive to carry out high-risk or long-term research which could be unprofitable in the short term." [2]

There are seven programme areas, the first two, ‘biotechnology for health’ and information technology are to be allocated the lion’s share: 16% and 27% respectively. Nuclear energy and nanotechnology each receives about 10%. Aeronautics and space gets 8%, food safety and health risks 5% and sustainable development and global change 13%.

Although the Framework contains statements about ethics and to supporting women in science, there does not seem to be any designated research budget or means of implementation. Ethical considerations, like gender equality and sustainability, ought to be criteria that apply across the board to all research, as stressed by Paul Lannoye MEP and many others. And while there is an area "Sustainable development and global change," sustainability ought to be an aim in all areas, but it is not.

As for citizen participation, "The aim of the measure in this area is to forge a good relationship between science and society in Europe and to secure greater openness towards innovation by placing relations on a new footing and introducing a well-informed dialogue between scientists, industry, political decision-makers and citizens." That is no more than a public relations exercise to gain acceptance for corporate science, and there is no budget allocated to it.

Nowhere in the entire framework proposal is there any mention of public good or social accountability, and none of the politicians at the Green Research Forum (June 6) thought to speak to them either.

Professor Felice Desotto, historian of science from the University of Louvain, Belgium, pointed out that Framework VI departs significantly from its predecessor, Framework V in that it no longer sees the need to justify research to the citizens. This lack of democracy is also reflected in the ‘instruments’ introduced: ‘network of excellence’ linking top research institutes, ‘integrated projects’ involving public/private partnerships, and ‘participation of EU in programmes carried out jointly (with national programmes)’. The first two categories may be allocated up to 20 million Euros and will be given considerable autonomy in defining their own projects. This is explicitly designed to support big corporate science, and in addition, to give them licence to do as they please without any need for scientific or social accountability and transparency. It will also effectively freeze out individuals and small groups doing innovative research for commercial as well as non-commercial ends.

An eighth area, "anticipating the EU’s future scientific and technical needs", allocated 13% of the budget, is meant to restore the plurality and flexibility to research. But neither the themes nor the precise requirements and instruments are specified, and the idea that the Commission can act rapidly and flexibly defies the imagination of anyone who has had experience applying for an EU grant.

The area ‘Genomics and biotechnology for health’ reduces practically every human disease to genes: cancer, neuro-degeneration, cardiovascular diseases, rare diseases, resistance to drugs and aging. Only in combating AIDs, malaria and tuberculosis is there any recognition that a broadly-based approach is needed. Dr. Mae-Wan Ho of the Institute of Science in Society, UK, was particularly damning on the genomics approach to health. "Everyone knows that the overwhelming causes of ill health are social and environmental", she said, "Poverty is a big killer, so too are the hundreds of industrial pollutants that damage every

organ system of our body including our genes."

The genomics approach itself is squandering much needed resources that could support other more effective and promising approaches. It acts against those most in need of care and treatment in our society. Holistic health practices of all kinds urgently require rigorous scientific research, both at the conceptual and clinical levels. The biophysics that would enable us to understand the biological effects of mobile phones, similarly, is given no research support at all in the Framework. (For a more detailed critique, see "The human genome -- a big white elephant," ISIS Report, June 9).

Public finance for genomics is a blatant example of governments diverting huge sums of tax money to bail out an industry already in trouble over GM crops, and now in danger of being driven bankrupt by the human genome. But the money allocated to genomics is dwarfed by the amount that information technology (IT) is getting, just at a time when the IT bubble has burst and a severe slow down is spreading across the world. The Green Party wants "no subsidy in the area of mobile phones".

It is in supporting nuclear energy research that the Framework gets the prize for subsidising failed corporate science. Most of the nuclear energy research budget is in fact allocated to EURATOM. This is a hangover from the EURATOM treaty of 1957, widely condemned as anachronistic, and should have been replaced with an agreement on solar energy long ago. Han-Josef Fell, Green MEP leading the critique of Framework VI, pointed out that the money spent on nuclear energy is more than ten times that for all the other energies put together, and yet it is responsible for just 5-7% of our energy supply. "It is the biggest flop!" he said.

Europe has yet to have a coherent energy policy. With the security of supply a growing problem, fossil fuel is a clear loser, as oil runs out in 50 years, and it obviously contributes massively to CO_2 emission. A comprehensive Framework V report had already concluded that it is feasible to switch from both nuclear and fossil fuels to renewable sources completely in 50 years, if accompanied by measures to stop wastage and to reduce energy use. Renewable energy sources can be brought to the market by 2010, or even sooner. Nuclear energy from fusion will take at least 50 years, if it ever works at all. Instead of abandoning nuclear energy, new fission possibilities are even being considered, when existing nuclear waste problems are nowhere near being solved. Not only cancers, but also immune damage are now linked to low dose ionising radiation, warns Green MEP Nuala Ahern. The Framework VI budget allocation for renewable energies is estimated as one-seventh of that of nuclear energy.

Germany legislated for increasing renewable energy cover from 5.9% to 12% by 2010. When it became law in 1999, renewable energy use increased by 1.1% in a single year. At that rate, the target will be reached long before 2010. This shows what governments can do to encourage the industry.

‘Food safety and health risks’ aims to improve traceability of chemical, microbiological and GM contaminants of food as well as their human health impacts. Also included is the production of ‘healthy’ foods through biotechnology as well as organic farming, and it will not be hard to guess which category will swallow up the budget.

‘Sustainable development and global change’ focuses exclusively on technology and then only within the framework of climate change. It does not address the social causes of climate change nor the potentially devastating effects on displacement of human populations and on health. There is also no support for the conceptual, scientific basis of sustainable systems.

Framework VI as it currently stands, does a lot to subsidise failed corporate science and technologies, and commits us to even more of the same. This is simply intolerable, at a time when we are in such dire need of support for independent science and scientists to protect us from all the failures and to anticipate and repair the damages that have been done.

1. This report is based on the Green Research Forum, June 6, 2001, European Parliament, Brussels.

2. See *Evaluation of the Commission’s proposal for the 6th EU Research Framework Plan and for research within the framework of EURATOM*, On behalf of the Bundestag parliamentary group Bundnis 90/DIE GRÜNEN, Hans-Josef Fell MdB, May 2001.

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