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On the future impact on policy of European Research Programmes

Since a couple of years, major efforts are under way to increase the impact of the European Research Programmes on policy, notably in the context of the continuing economic crisis. This paper calls for some prudence in “selling” the policy importance of European Research, and invites for a wider view on the issue.

Intro

European Research Programmes like FP7 (2006-2013) or Horizon 2020 (2014-2020) represent a substantial part of the EU budget and play an important role in the overall European policy portfolio. While European Research programmes were from their very beginning onwards aimed at being supportive to EU policy making, the actual importance and significance of this objective has considerably increased in recent years.

Two main directions could be highlighted in this context:

- European Research should play a more active and more substantial role in shaping the other European policy domains;
- European Research should play a key role in reaching the overarching objective of current EU policy, and thus help the European economy to get out of the crisis as quickly as possible to create sustainable growth and new jobs.

Both objectives do of course merit full support; yet there might also be good reasons to get slightly nervous about both of them.

The future impact on European policies

Evidence based politics as part of a more general rational policy making rationale is very much *à la mode* these days, and this approach has indeed convincing intellectual merits. It actually seems to work well for clearly and relatively narrowly defined problems for which such evidence can be produced on time for the political debate.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of policy issues at stake at the European level do not really fall in this category, and contrary to some aspirations the impact of scientific evidence might thus be far more limited or even almost nonexistent.

In addition, one might question whether the concept of rational policy making is, beyond its theoretical strengths, actually an adequate model to describe current policy shaping processes. Especially within the European arena, with 28 Member States being actively involved, the importance of bargaining processes of all kinds cannot be overestimated.

In other words, while it is worthwhile to increase the supply of scientifically based evidence for policy decisions, one could remain sceptical as for the degree of demand for this kind of input in the current European political machinery. The efforts now underway are by no means useless, but they run the risk of ending up with huge disappointment.

The future impact on jobs and growth

A good part of the extra money provided in the EU budget for the new European Research Programme is based on the promise that research can play an important role to help Europe out of the crisis. The argument per se is by no means wrong; yet again there is room for disappointment when having a closer look at the time frames involved:

The economic crisis in Europe is a reality right now, with millions of jobless young people and sluggish growth in major parts of the EU. Research projects run normally for 3 to 5 years, and any research results will take some extra time afterwards to become fully operational and enter the market. Only from there onwards one could reasonably expect a real impact on the economy. Of course the speed of technological progress varies from one area to another (and is quicker in software industry than for locomotives), but on average it might well take 5 to 10 years or even longer before research activities launched in 2014 will generate additional revenues and new jobs.

This reality is by no means an argument to cut research spending now – these investments today are the basis for the future development of our continent. But again, the attempts in selling research as a short term solution to today's problems might be inappropriate and lead to mutual disappointment.

A wider perspective

The argument here is therefore not that European Research Programmes have no impact on policy. To the contrary, the potential impact of European Research activities on our societies and economies is enormous – but the direct impact on current European Policy shaping and overcoming the crisis might be substantially lower than one might have hoped for.

While there might be thus a kind of massive political “overselling” of the short term impact of European Research on policies and economic growth, and in parallel an intensive and almost desperate search for “hard evidence”, it is amazing to see that the enormous allegedly “soft” impacts of European Research on our societies are broadly ignored.

With the demographic and economic constraints we are faced with, Europe desperately needs to create “momentum”, not just in an economic sense, but more broadly across the entire society. Europe needs more curiosity, more efforts to change, and more recognition for excellent ideas. Research delivers on all this – and a common European Research Programme is a strong political signal that Europe can achieve even more if we act together.

Research is an investment in the future – and to a large extent an investment in young people. And again this is a strong signal given the current circumstances in many parts of Europe. Research Programmes offer chances for success for the young generation in Europe, and this message again gets stronger, the fewer constraints and conditions are applied.

Yes, it is important to collect all kind of evidence for demonstrating the “hard” impact of European Research.

But No, whatever we are able to measure is not the full picture.

Yes, Europe is a reality and hence no longer living exclusively from great ideas.

But No, contributing to a mind change in Europe is not a minor achievement, and just because it seems impossible to measure it does not mean it is meaningless.

European Research programmes have a great potential to change the mindset in Europe – and this might actually be their most important, but largely ignored, policy impact

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Far less visible, but probably equally important, is the trend for an increased impact of politics on European Research Programmes. This topic is addressed in ThinkPIECES 5/2014.