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Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE)

Scientific research partnership: North-South and South-South

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Prologue

Population growth, climatic changes, scarcity of water, the ongoing loss of arable land, the degradation of the environment, the worldwide urbanisation process, the growing energy consumption.... A learned Society as the one assembled today hardly needs to be told about the serious threats the human race is facing now, and which it will be due to face at an accelerating rate in the future.

One way, among others, to overcome these menacing problems is to tackle them with scientific methods, i.e. to carry out appropriate research and to apply its results on a worldwide scale. Scholars, scientists and research workers thus have an important part to play, as well as politicians and leaders of the private sector. And - perhaps because they do not usually belong to the actual decision makers scientists, as opposed to politicians and industrial leaders, have the liberty to think on a long term basis. It is their duty, then, to call the attention of the public as well as of the decision makers to the threats that are imminent and to show ways of escape.

Research, however, will prove useful only if it is conducted on a worldwide scale, by a sufficiently large number of searchers, and adequately distributed all over the globe. That means that research capacity building in the South is essential. This is not merely a matter of solidarity, but something that is in the interest of all of humankind. The question of how research capacity building in the South is best to be achieved, was discussed in detail at the International Conference on Scientific Research Partnership for Sustainable Development, which was held in this country in early March this year ⁽¹⁾. The resulting publication is already available. The principle widely accepted by the Conference was that of research work in partnership, in interdisciplinary, long-term programmes. As to partnership, it means more commitment, intellectual honesty and mutual trust. It may well be that the majority of Western scientists, at present, are neither willing to nor capable of taking up that challenge. - Why not ?

Thesis no. 1

The aims of scientific research are to be re-defined, taking into account today's threatened, globalized society.

- As it has always been, the goal of research is to further widen man's knowledge. The desire to know more about the world and to understand how it works, is inherent to Homo sapiens. Fundamental scientific research offers one practicable approach towards the understanding of Creation. Under no circumstances should fundamental research be discontinued.

- But, in addition, research needs to contribute to worldwide sustainable development ^(2,3).

- It must also contribute to worldwide social justice. In this context, special attention is to be given to gender relations and to poverty ⁽⁴⁾.

- Finally, research should foster intercultural dialogue ⁽⁴⁾. That includes history and especially the history and mechanisms of international trade ⁽⁵⁾.

Under the influence of industrialised countries research has drifted off much too far from its original goal, namely to promote human dignity. The industrious busyness with which research is often conducted in the North serves personal prestige, careers and income more than it promotes human dignity and liberty. Also, the aim of achieving commercial competitiveness - the unofficial, yet compelling yardstick of Swiss research policy - is doubtless legitimate, but it is inadequate, at least when seen from a longterm viewpoint.

Thesis no. 2

Research is to be carried out on a worldwide scale, and extended in particular to the Southern hemisphere.

- Thereby, its first aim is to contribute in a sustainable manner to research capacity building in the countries of the South ⁽⁶⁾.

- To promote research capacities in the South, one most promising way appears to be that of launching research programmes in partnership, as referred to above. What does that really mean? Nothing less than that Northern scientists relinquish the

(often unadmitted) claim to dominance and their feeling of superiority towards their colleagues in the South.

- The programmes envisaged are to handle problems of common concern. They must respond to a real demand, and be co-defined by the end-users of the results that are to be expected. The research agendas must be fully and clearly defined. They must follow a holistic approach and be conceived with a view to long-term co-operation. Lastly, the programmes are to provide ongoing training, throughout the whole duration of the evolving programme, and accessible to all participating in it.
- The ultimate goal of partnership is the ongoing, two-way exchange of scientists between South and North. This, of course, should preclude neither existing North-North interrelations nor the stimulation of South-South co-operation.

Thesis no. 3

Research work needs to be seen sensu lato, i.e. comprising more than it is usually considered to do.

- It encompasses fundamental, goal-oriented and applied research.
- It begins with setting up the agendas - with the participation of the end-users, including local communities, the authorities concerned, partner institutions and donors.
- It establishes the best possible communication lines.
- It provides all relevant information and avoids redundant work (⁷).
- It offers appropriate, regular feed-back to all concerned.
- It is concerned with timely decisions about ensuing intervention studies and the application of the results obtained. To that effect it may seek the collaboration of development organisations, including NGOs.
- It cares about maintaining the gains achieved. The past has shown that it is often easier to build up achievements than to maintain them (⁸).

The responsibility of research workers does not end with one or several papers being accepted for publication in internationally renowned reviews. Their responsibility also extends to the utilisation of work successfully accomplished and

the maintenance of the gains obtained. (This, however, does not mean research workers are to be made responsible for possible misuse of the results of their work !)

Thesis no. 4

Swiss research workers are not adequately prepared for research work in partnership with the South.

In most cases they lack substantial personal experience of life in the South. Regrettably, this frequently applies to senior staff too, who find no time to sojourn in their partners' countries for prolonged periods.

In addition, and as others in the North, Swiss researchers tend to:

- feel Northerners are superior;
- ignore informal traditional knowledge;
- be unaware of their partners' national research policies;
- not be too keen about South-South links.

With reference to the training they have undergone in the North, they suffer from a number of disadvantages such as

- they are coerced into producing results and papers according to the imperative "publish or perish";
- they are unfamiliar with truly interdisciplinary work, i.e. across the limits of traditional Faculties;
- they lack managerial expertise;
- they are ignorant about the rules of the private sector;
- they are insufficiently aware of nascent socio-political changes abroad, and even in Switzerland.

Thesis no. 5

Swiss research workers will have to live with less money than hitherto.

By now, that seems to be a fact, inescapable, and very likely irreversible. However

financial means, however indispensable they are, are less important than one's mind. The scarcity of public funding does not release us as scientists to stick to visions, considering alternatives, looking for new sources for funds, and making our ideas and intentions known.

- We need to look for alternative ways of partnership. To give but two examples, these could be the institutionalised exchange of senior and junior staff among universities and other institutions of higher learning, or the nomination of colleagues from the South to members of editorial boards of scientific journals.

- The outlook for the funding of research partnerships is perhaps not as bleak as it might be, thanks to an agreement newly reached by the Swiss National Foundation for Scientific Research (SNF) with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which makes co-financing of research in partnership easier than it was in the past. Funds might also be found by co-operating with various NGOs, with European agencies, or with international organisations.

- To get new ideas through, scientists must make the necessary effort to provide the public and the decision-makers, both in politics and in the private sector, with accurate information about the necessity of research capacity building in the South, and about the long range benefits of international research for sustainable development.

Thesis no. 6

The time for an increased research partnership with the South is now here.

- The restructuring of most of the institutions of higher learning that is taking place at present in Switzerland offers an opportunity to add a new dimension to their previous terms of reference. The "Fachhochschulen" (Specialized Technical Colleges) will be granted a new status in the near future. The "Eidgenössischen Technischen Hochschulen" (Federal Polytechnic High Schools in Zurich and Lausanne) will adapt their curricula accordingly. Several Cantonal Universities are in the process of achieving more autonomy; most of them have also begun to organize regional co-operation.

- Space research and research at the nano level seem to lead to more intellectual

modesty. The women's drive for emancipation raises fundamental questions, including questions relating to traditional scientific approaches. As a result of such trends the call for a concern with ethical questions can no longer be ignored.

- Swiss voters are growing increasingly aware of the fact that the political isolation they voluntarily chose for their country, both within Europe and in the international community, needs tangible justification. That can only consist of more solidarity, mainly with the most underprivileged parts of the world.

Epilogue

Do not let us indulge in illusions: neither the public, nor politicians, nor industrial leaders are waiting for scientists to tell them what to do. Scientists are not going to change the world. Yet lack of power is no reason to turn to fatalism; even small steps do influence events ⁽⁵⁾.

This Society may be seen as a proof of the effectiveness of small undertakings. Numerous are its members who, for many years, have been involved in one or another programme of scientific partnership. To cite but the two examples, there is the Ifakara Health Research and Development Centre in Tanzania ⁽⁹⁾ or the Centre suisse de recherches scientifiques en Côte d'Ivoire ⁽¹⁰⁾. Let us also not forget the remarkable achievements of the international organization for cooperation in health care, Medicus Mundi, in particular its Swiss branch. These and other examples all demonstrate that partnership can indeed work. Partnership may also help by facilitating South-South relations, for it is often the North which has addresses of various institutions in the South at its disposal, as well as the means necessary to establish first contacts.

Nevertheless, the idea of partnership needs much stronger support than it has been given in the past. It needs support at all levels and from all disciplines. It needs support from students asking for information; it needs support from lecturers, talking about it in their courses; and it needs the initiative of heads of clinics, institutes and seminars, taking the risk of getting themselves involved. The Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (KFPE) will gladly assist them with information ⁽¹¹⁾ and advice ⁽¹²⁾.

Zusammenfassung

Zur Bewältigung zahlreicher drängender globaler Probleme kann wissenschaftliche Forschung vieles beitragen. Allerdings muss Forschung weltweit betrieben werden und insbesondere auf die Länder des Südens ausgedehnt werden. Dafür sind die Forschungskapazitäten jener Länder erheblich auszubauen und zu festigen. Die Schweizerische Strategie zur Förderung der Forschung in Entwicklungsländern verfolgt vorab dieses Ziel. Probleme allgemeiner Bedeutung sind gemeinsam anzugehen, in entwicklungs-orientierten, langfristig und interdisziplinär angelegten Forschungspartnerschaften, in deren Rahmen die erforderliche Schulung allen Beteiligten laufend vermittelt wird. Partnerschaft stellt hohe Ansprüche. In sechs Thesen wird dargetan, weshalb das Gros der schweizerischen Forschungsgemeinschaft heute diesen Anforderungen noch kaum zu entsprechen vermag. Trotz der relativen Knappheit an Mitteln scheint der Zeitpunkt gekommen, das schweizerische Hochschulwesen auch in dieser Hinsicht zu überprüfen.

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