



Agricultural Research in the European Research Area

Palais des Congrès, Versailles, 5-6 December 2000

Conclusions & Recommendations



QUALITY OF LIFE AND MANAGEMENT
OF LIVING RESOURCES

KA5 – Sustainable Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry



Conclusions and Recommendations of the Versailles Conference

Integrating Research

1. The “**Multi-functionality**” of European agriculture is a key concept. Developing a multifunctional agriculture entails research towards a competitive agriculture which is environmentally benign, stimulates rural development, uses natural resources in a sustainable manner, while producing sufficient quantities of safe and affordable food and non-food products, high in quality and diversity, and respectful towards nature. To make this a success, research is needed to quantify the externalities surrounding agricultural production, with respect to issues such as environmental protection, rural development, nature conservation and socio-cultural interactions. These externalities are necessary due to specifications which will arise from future CAP reform, global trade negotiations, and consumer pressure, where quantified information will be essential in any re-shaping of the agricultural sector. Research should also aim to support different EU policies – such as CAP, trade, budget, health or environment – influencing agriculture to become consistent parts of good governance in multifunctional agriculture.

2. The food and agriculture sectors will be major beneficiaries of developments in the area of **genomics and post-genomic research**. Genomics is a discipline dedicated to the acquisition of knowledge and increasing our understanding of the genetic basis of crops and animals and the relationship between food and health. This knowledge will directly contribute, through post genomic technologies, to the improvement of the quality and safety of our food. A co-ordinated European agricultural genomics research effort must therefore be capable of organising and motivating the best competence available in Europe, giving added value from working in close co-operation with national initiatives, generating publicly available information, and being flexible in duration but strict and realistic in setting its objectives. It must also be prepared to work closely with the social sciences in order to understand and accommodate the views of the citizen in this domain. EU research programmes cannot do everything in this vast field but they should optimally focus upon areas and modalities where the greatest impact can be obtained.

3. To accentuate the positive aspects of agriculture, the substantial contribution it can make in improving our **environment** must be stressed. Soil, water and air are the key agricultural media and their sustainable utilisation in an agricultural context could have a profound impact on the mitigation of greenhouse gas release and climate change, the recycling of organic wastes, and the conservation of biodiversity. Ways to measure this impact and to inform society of its progress are urgently needed.

4. Agricultural research must be **society-driven**, supporting agriculture to respond to the demands of the consumer and citizen. It must be seen to be of value to society as a whole. In this respect

both the transparency and independence of the research carried out are of prime importance to ensure reliability and credibility. Furthermore, ways to improve the **communication of research results** to farmers and society in Europe, in a comprehensible and accessible manner are needed. Extensive information is available from agricultural research funding in Europe and an opportunity exists to format this information in an integrated and uniform manner for the direct benefit of farmers and society. The extensive use of advancements made in information technology is essential here to provide such a valuable public service. In addition a more active involvement in the programming and priority setting by stakeholders in society and industry should be sought.

5. Agricultural research must address the major issues surrounding **food safety**. It must focus on the prediction of events and finding appropriate answers to ensuing problems as rapidly as possible. On the basis of consumer needs and requirements, research should provide guidance on how to manage the **food chain**, with respect to primary production, transport, storage, and transformation to food and feed products. In certain instances, this may call for a greater degree of flexibility in funding procedures and priority setting.

6. **Interdisciplinary** research projects are an essential tool for the future of agriculture. Agricultural research in Europe is multifaceted and highly decentralised with disciplines ranging from molecular biology, physics, geology, chemistry, economics and engineering, to the classical plant and animal sciences. Barriers must be broken down to allow the cross-fertilisation of different disciplines which can address the most important Europe-wide challenges such as multi-functionality, the relation between economy and ecology, the application of post genomics, and safer food. Accordingly, administrative and political reorganisation at the Member State and applicant countries level is indispensable to facilitate the fundamental changes required for interdisciplinary research, which actively involves the different stakeholders.

7. **Integrated Interdisciplinary Research Projects (IIP)** should be of sufficient critical mass and involve recognised networks of excellence across Europe to bring about a substantial impact on a given problem within a limited timeframe. European consortia should work closely with national authorities whose own initiatives must be considered within the project. The selection process could be two-step with the first step focusing upon an expression of interest to deal with a specific problem while the second would involve the creation of consortia preferably in liaison with national authorities and involving the relevant stakeholders. In such projects, careful attention should be given to the process of integration itself. Intrinsic to any project is the long-term goal of a sustainable agriculture.

Structuring and strengthening of the European Research Area (ERA)

8. **Agricultural Infrastructures** include experimental farms, environmental observatories, genetic resources, databases etc. There is a clear need for their categorisation, and for a wider availability to external parties within Europe. Within an ERA, access to these facilities for different consortia would help to make research more attractive. Minimum requirements for their utilisation within an ERA would depend upon their accessibility, the quality of the facilities, and the willingness to share information generated.

9. The **mobility** of researchers throughout Europe must be improved if the ERA is to be a success, and this is especially relevant to agriculture. Fundamental administrative problems need to be addressed to make mobility in research and training more attractive. Examples of where administrative hurdles need to be overcome include the coverage of all costs, improving the socio-economic conditions of the visiting scientist, re-integration upon return, mutual recognition of diplomas, and harmonisation of working conditions. Any researcher trained or working under the remit of the ERA in agriculture should be acknowledged as contributing towards a sustainable European agriculture. Categories to be specifically addressed under mobility actions include diversity with respect to ethnic groupings, women, older scientists, and the needs of researchers in applicant countries. A longer-term goal is the development of a recognised "European career" for researchers throughout Europe.

10. Many agricultural problems are not confined by national boundaries and are truly **regional** from an environmental and climatic perspective. A co-ordinated agricultural research effort within the ERA should therefore work within the context of agro-ecological or agro-economic zones. These zones could be considered at the European level but in co-ordination with the needs of national authorities to avoid duplication. Valuable suggestions for regional involvement in European policies can already be gained from the INTER-REG programme.

11. Agricultural research has an important role to play in adapting the Common Agricultural Policy to take into account the needs of **applicant countries**. In particular there is a common interest in defeating plant and animal diseases, reducing pesticide use, and conserving genetic resources and biodiversity, and the ERA could provide a forum for closer collaboration in these areas. Better information on the degree and quality of research going on in the applicant countries must be more readily available and could be addressed through specific networks of excellence. The lower level of funding in these countries resulting in deficiencies in infrastructures and hi-tech based research, needs to be addressed. Better use should be made of current research strengths, particularly in genetics, along with consideration of the special mobility needs of these countries.

12. The **opening of national programmes** to researchers from other countries is intrinsic to the overall success of any proposed ERA. The only known example in Europe is in the United Kingdom where 25% of the agricultural research programme is made available to external parties on an annual basis. Opening national programmes on a wider scale across Europe is generally seen as a desirable goal.

However the complexities and differences between national systems could create an innate resistance which would be hard to overcome. For these reasons a step by step approach should be deployed where external parties are given access to specific fields of research before whole programmes are opened. For example this could be envisaged in the field of agricultural genomics where several national initiatives are currently operational but without significant co-ordination or accessibility to external parties. Other complex areas where the opening of national programmes could falter is in the area of enlargement where the current research structure is too unwieldy for application to such a large number of new countries. The ERA will also need to consider the protection of intellectual property and other interests, for without a harmonised patent system in Europe, participating countries may be obliged to seek patents separately in each country.

13. Greater effort should be made in the short term in **national programme co-ordination and alignment**, so that extensive discussion, debate and networking can facilitate the eventual opening of national programmes in the longer term. Several cross-border alignments of agricultural research have recently been launched but these are on a small scale and related to specific cross-border problems. Indeed, within the context of the CAP, since 1974 there has been a legal requirement for Member States to co-ordinate their agricultural research activities in accordance with regulation 1728/74 (SCAR - Standing Committee on Agricultural Research). The operation of this unique requirement for Member State research co-ordination should be improved under the ERA. A working SCAR committee could facilitate issues like categorisation of infrastructures, dissemination of research programmes and results, identification of centres of excellence etc.

14. **Agriculture in Europe is very fragmented**. In truth, the various functions of agriculture are all managed in a very independent fashion and there are many different political committees and groupings at a European level, sometimes with conflicting agendas. Better integration of these political groupings, the policies and the disciplines and views of other interest groups would certainly help towards a genuine consolidation of the future role of agriculture in our society.

15. Concerning **genetically modified crops and novel foods**, industry feels that political decision-making is a slow and cumbersome exercise. There is a lack of a Europe-wide system for approval and legislation concerning trials, pilot scale-up, and release, similarly there is no Europe-wide patent system, and decisions on what constitutes a novel food can sometimes take up to one year to be made. Procedures to bring about a resolution to these problems have to be addressed within the ERA to enable a more competitive agro-food sector to grow.

16. In conclusion, the foundations of "a new contract for agriculture" were laid and the Versailles conference was a first step on the road to developing a much more constructive relationship between agricultural science, agriculture, and society and governance. Furthermore, by striving to apply excellence and relevance, an ERA for agriculture will make the sector more directly relevant to consumer demands and hence improve society's perception of agriculture, along with a better appreciation of its contribution to health and environment.

A new vision to satisfy societal demands

On 18 January 2000, the European Commission adopted the Communication "Towards a European Research Area". The objective of this communication was to contribute initiatives for a more favourable research environment in Europe. At the European Council held in Lisbon from 23 to 24 March 2000, this communication was fully ratified by the Heads of State and of Governments who recommended the installation of a series of deadlines to help realise the ERA. Furthermore the Council Resolution of 15 June 2000 requested the Member States and the Commission to take the necessary measures to start implementing the project.

Meanwhile, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee and the candidate countries and both the scientific and industrial sectors gave their strong support to this project as a means for Europe to demonstrate global leadership in scientific research.

Agricultural research until now has undoubtedly assisted in making European agriculture and agro-industry an important player in the global economy. However, agricultural research, if it is to meet the challenges of the new millennium, has to be restructured within the context of the European Research Area, in order to (1) be able to keep pace with ongoing international research activities, (2) contribute to the policies of the European Union, and (3) meet the increasingly exacting needs of the European citizens.

In this respect, the French Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries, in conjunction with the European Commission- Directorate-General for Research organised a conference, under the auspices of the French Presidency of the European Union, entitled "Agricultural Research in the European Research Area". This conference was aimed at establishing an open debate and a common action plan, which will help define a structural and operational framework for the implementation of future agricultural research within the European Research Area.

More specifically it will:

- Identify the structural and functional disparities of agricultural research in the European Research Area regarding aspects such as: Research activities, innovation "start up" and SMEs, Research Infrastructures, Human resources, Science and Governance.
- Propose an action plan to restructure agricultural research within the context of the European Research Area.

This conference is just the first step toward a new approach to dealing with European agricultural research. The potential benefits for the Member States, the scientific community, industry and European citizens are numerous but they will only be realised through constructive debate such as this which fixes targeted objectives and identifies the means to put them in place. We have no doubt that the high level of expertise gathered from across Europe for the purpose of this conference will lay the foundations for such a structure.

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