The Innovation Union: The perfect means to confused ends?

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As a contribution to the current consultation by the European Commission on the Green Paper on a Common Strategic Framework for future EU Research and Innovation Funding, we would like to submit a written response in the form of a commentary entitled "The Innovation Union: The perfect means to confused ends?". This paper is currently under submission for publication in an academic journal. Because of the deadline of the consultation, we hereby indicate briefly the key messages from the paper and hope that the EC will consider the full version when published.

In this commentary, we stress that innovation is not an end in itself but a means, hence the need to deepen the reflection by considering the purpose of innovation. If our aims are better human health and wellbeing, improved quality of life, and sustainability, then our discourses, policies and actions should retarget innovation to deliver these aims. Too narrow a focus on technological innovation merely to bring more products on the market will inevitably continue to produce serious unintended negative health, societal and environmental side-effects. Furthermore, such focus maintains us in both technological and ideological lock-ins. Yet the current economic, societal and environmental crises will not be solved by more of the same, and given the scale and irreversibility of our environmental impacts there is no time for complacency. This calls for a shift from market meaningful innovation to socially meaningful innovation (innovation with a purpose) and the adoption of a broader concept of innovation which not only includes technological innovation, but also non-technological innovation, social innovation and behavioural innovation.

It is a combination of innovative ways of thinking and doing, and innovative products and services that can deliver the transformative capacity that will put us on a more ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable path. In this context, we argue for deepening consideration of the value of environmental research as a key driver of all forms of innovation.