

'Science for Europe'

30 June 2011, Neth-ER news

These days, visitors of the 'European quarter' in Brussels see huge banners with slogans emphasizing the need for a stronger EU economic governance. Indeed, the European Union should be more than just an 'informal club' of good willing and friendly nations. The membership should imply engagement and commitment based on a common vision. A common vision that sees a bright future for Europe as a peaceful and prosperous region. As a union of nations that is on a par with other leading nations.

The European Commission is preparing a 'Common Strategic Framework for EU research and innovation funding'. A conference was held on this subject recently, where the essential role for research and innovation for the future of Europe became impressively clear.

Obviously, this implies the need for a strong European science base and an excellent European research area in order to tackle the huge societal challenges we are facing and to strengthen competitiveness.

Halfhearted participation in the Common Strategic Framework is not an option, it is irresponsible. This can be illustrated very compellingly by one simple graph: the exponential growth of the world population. On the scale of human presence on earth this growth steepened only very recently, about 200 years ago, and we are on that same very steep curve today. Until leveling off in 40 or 50 years or so that growth will continue. The absolute numbers are daunting: we are 6 billion now, we will be 4 billion *more* in only decades from now. And where does that leave us, Europeans? Quantitatively we will be a minority compared to the rest of the world. So 'quality' is all the more important. Quality of life based on the quality of our research. Understanding and mitigating climate change, healthy ageing, finding replacements for rare materials, establishing a one hundred percent 'green' energy cycle, understanding how to deal with new technology and with each other. Only if our European research is at the forefront of the developments in these and related areas will we survive.

The fragmentation of economic governance in Europe has brought the EU at the brink of a crisis. It has also revealed the fragility of European solidarity. We need politicians, we need 'statesmanship' in European politics to bring back the common strategic vision that defines the position of a united Europe in the world. Research and innovation are an indispensable part of that vision. The European Heads of Research Councils (EUROHORCs) have underlined their willingness, no, their strong will, to collaborate with each other and with the European Commission to work together within the Common Strategic Framework. They will henceforth coordinate their efforts and unite forces through their new organization ScienceEurope. They will speak with one voice to be better heard by the national and European politicians. Scientists and politicians: on the move together!