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## 1. A Changing World

This meeting concerns new challenges for academies including our own, in a changing world. And indeed the world is changing fast: globalization, environmental changes, population growth, etc.

I shall limit myself, however, to considering a few changes that are more immediately relevant to those academies concerned with the developing world such as ours, and focus our interest only on four aspects.

### 1.1. RESEARCH, AND MORE PARTICULARLY THE MECHANISMS FOR CHOOSING RESEARCH TOPICS

While the research cost is generally rising, on the other hand funding from the public sector is declining — at least in comparison with the marked and sustained funding by the private sector :

- Proportionately more research is conducted directly by private companies, in a context of clear and continuous concentration;
- Universities and research institutions are becoming increasingly dependent upon private sources of funds, either through contracts from companies (with sometimes publication restrictions) or through foundation grants. Most foundations are really independent, some are partly independent, but some not at all.

A consequence of this state of the art is that the choice of research topics is increasingly fostered, not by the investigator's scientific interest, but by his/her hope of getting financing. From the researcher's point of view, this means a restriction to his/her independence.

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While in the North this is by no means a healthy situation, there is even a greater dependency of researchers in the South!

## 1.2. PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

The so-called “good” scientific journals (which Professor Bruno Messerli, in his speech at this Symposium, referred to as “mainstream journals”):

- Have become extremely expensive ;
- Are owned by publishing houses with commercial interests ;
- Establish the rules of the game.

We are attending a slow but sustained process of *oligopolisation* of scientific publications by a limited number of journals, with increasing power over research and researchers. In theory there is a self-regulating mechanism offered by the peer-review system. But in practice the decision is made by the journal editor, who sometimes may be very arrogant.

As a consequence :

- For a researcher in the South the chances to have an article published in one of the “mainstream journals” are rather low ;
- Since he/she does not publish in the right place, he/she has less access to funding sources.

The trouble is that to a large extent the journals’ reviewers are the same who act as advisors to the sources of research funding. This is but another aspect of the *oligopolisation* mentioned earlier. Needless to say, the problem is worse for the investigators in the South, thereby still widening further the North/South gap in research and research capacity.

To summarize this important point :

- Research is getting more competitive and more expensive than ever ;
- It is increasingly controlled by large companies and/or private foundations;
- Not only the funding of research but also publication tend to become oligopolistic;
- The independence of researchers is threatened.

While in the North we do possess effective defence mechanisms, such as the autonomy of universities, these mechanisms operate much less successfully in the South. Of course there is here a role to play by those academies which benefit from freedom and autonomy.

### 1.3. THE UNPRECEDENTED EVOLUTION OF COMMUNICATION

In the coming ten years, or even sooner, the situation will be completely different from what it is now as far as communication is concerned. Information will be widely accessible, overabundant, of extremely different quality, and even sometimes manipulated. This, of course, will also apply to scientific publications.

There is a need for safeguards, *i.e.* for mechanisms such as :

- Sieving out unscientific or biased information, assisting people to make free, adequate choices in their readings ;
- Increasing free access to independent information.

Again, this is an area in which, I feel, our academies could play a useful role.

### 1.4. THE “NEW ACCOUNTABILITY”

There is, fortunately enough, a positive trend, which I would call the “new accountability” and which also comes from the Anglo-Saxon world :

- People increasingly require the decision-makers to justify their decisions and the consequences of such decisions ;
- Decision-makers in turn wish their advisors and their information sources to be accountable to them.

More generally concerning the foregoing topic, doctors, technicians, scholars, scientists, and others are increasingly under pressure to provide justifications about their activity, including the potential and even remote consequences of their research. The French philosopher Edgar Morin sees this aspect as one of the positive side-effects of globalization.

And, of course, this requisite should apply to our academies too (see below).

## 2. The Challenges

What are the challenges, and what could be the possible answers ? For further discussion I would like to put forward five suggestions which, from my point of view, academies should apply.

### 2.1. FIGHTING FOR THEIR OWN INDEPENDENCE

A major asset of an academy is its independence (P. de Maret, previously in this panel, used the term “autonomy”). Our Academy certain-

ly is independent. Then the challenge, for us and for the others, in a fast changing world, is not only to preserve this autonomy, but to *assert* it.

Adequate funding is of course necessary (for organizing meetings, for publishing proceedings and syntheses, for disseminating consensus and guidelines, for inviting guests, etc.). In turn this requires a relevant, credible, and accountable academy.

## 2.2. NOT DOING WHAT OTHERS CAN DO BETTER, BUT RATHER DOING WHAT THEY THEMSELVES CAN DO BETTER

Our academies should not (or not any more) operate as scientific societies — which they definitely are not — but rather be a place for interdisciplinary encounter, capable when needed of proposing consensus on global issues.

In this respect the records of the Belgian Academy of Overseas Sciences are of good quality, but largely deficient in the number and depth of issues it has been dealing with. In recent years the Academy has promoted and/or organized debates on world topics such as global warming, genetically modified organisms, water, tropical forests, etc. Hopefully it will cover in the future other difficult and controversial themes such as sustainable development, demographic growth, urbanization, etc. And it will be given the means to do so.

Why, and what for ? I suggest, in the following order :

- Putting problems and solutions into perspective ;
- Having fundamental and applied research meetings, producing syntheses, proposing consensus ;
- Helping access to adequate *free* information through its own publications and through selecting sound information, perhaps by using its website ;
- Informing and enlightening public and private decision-makers, as well as opinion-makers, and particularly the press.

As a rule I do not think academies should still publish immediate research results. It is not their function, and anyhow fewer and fewer scientists submit their most recent findings to an academy as a first choice. Most probably they are right.

## 2.3. FURTHER STRENGTHENING INTERDISCIPLINARITY

I stress intentionally *interdisciplinarity*, which is more than *pluri* or *multidisciplinarity*. Our Academy in this respect is doing well. Still more can be done, particularly through actively and widely opening up.

## 2.4. OPENING UP

I also strongly feel that another challenge to academies such as ours, if their goal is to bring a relevant and credible contribution to our changing world, is to open widely in various directions.

### 2.4.1. *To the South*

- Listening more to the South ;
- Improving the North/South balance in membership, publications, meetings (this one being a good example to be repeated), etc. ;
- Being present and active in the South (such as recently at the joint meeting in Bolivia).

### 2.4.2. *To Young People*

Not as a matter of age, but because often youngsters are more up to date on specialized matters. We cannot anymore afford to rely almost only on the experience of our senior members. This could be done in a variety of ways : for example more young people could be recruited, or invited to speak at our meetings; or more activities could be specially geared towards younger people, including doctoral fellows.

### 2.4.3. *To the Outside World*

I am aware that this is a controversial question, which goes against a long-standing tradition. But this tradition, in my view, has become too conservative and even counterproductive. Would it not be advantageous to our academies :

- To recruit not only academics, professors, scientists, but also civil servants, people from private enterprises and NGOs, from the press, etc. On condition that they meet strict requirements of knowledge, of experience, and above all of commitment towards the South ?
- To organize targeted meetings, in order to dialogue with the civil society — more generally with the outside world ?

## 2.5. ENGAGING IN AFFIRMATIVE ACTION WITHIN SOCIETY. BEING ACTIVISTS !

Advocacy and lobbying are major aspects of our new role, and we, as academies, should take initiatives such as :

- Stimulating debates, indoors and outdoors, on global issues ;
- Informing public and private decision-makers ;
- Asking — even requiring — accountability from all actors involved in development : scientists first of all, but also sponsors of research (foundations, governments, corporations, etc.), national, regional and international authorities, and lastly opinion-makers.

Our academies themselves should of course be accountable : this will require increased sensitivity to outside observers' opinions, and clearly more transparency.

### **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this Symposium has set in motion a questioning and self-analysis process which our Academy, and perhaps sister academies as well, might like to pursue in the immediate future.