

International Round Table on “Science, technology and Innovation Policy: Parliamentary Perspective”

Helsinki 13-14 January 2003

Report

The International Round Table, entitled “Science Technology and Innovation Policy. The Parliamentary Perspective”, was held in Helsinki, Finland on 13-14 January 2003. The meeting was jointly organised by UNESCO, the Committee for the Future of the Finnish Parliament and ISESCO.

The International Round Table brought together participants from developed and developing countries drawn from governments, parliaments, academia, media and international organisations. Delegates from 31 countries from all regions attended the meeting (The list of participants is attached)

The objectives of the Conference were:

- To give Parliamentarians from different regions of the world the opportunity to discuss present and future issues, problems and challenges concerning science and technology legislation
- To examine the process of decision-making on issues of science legislation and the role of Government, Parliament and the Media.
- To exchange information in S&T legislation.
- To make future-oriented recommendations to the National Parliaments, UNESCO and other International organisations.
- To explore the possibility of the creation of a permanent Network of Parliamentarians on Science and Technology in order to enhance international co-operation on science and technology decision making process.

The participants held lively discussions about the problems and opportunities facing science and technology. Several key issues were addressed. These included: What are the major constraints the Parliamentarians encounter in science and technology legislation? What kind of mechanisms has to be identified in the Parliaments to deal with new challenges faced by science? What is role of the scientific community in science decision making process (legislation)? How to create or improve a constructive dialogue between scientists and parliamentarians? How to involve different components of society, including the public, the media, in the science legislation process? How to share national experiences at the international level?

The programme (attached) consisted of four sessions. Each session started with an introduction followed by additional presentations, the purpose of which was to stimulate the debate.

Opening of the meeting

Her Excellency, Mrs Riitta Uosukainen, Speaker of the Parliament of Finland, made an opening statement. In welcoming all participants to the meeting, Mrs Uosukainen named some of the challenges facing the decision making process such as the interaction between various actors, the dialogue between researchers and practitioners of science, on one hand and decision makers on the other, the need for the decision makers of support of knowledge, information and expertise. She

emphasised the need of a culture of discussion that implies not only the availability of the results of the scientific research, but also the perspective of such results in the society.

On behalf of the Director General of UNESCO, Mr. Walter Erdelen, Assistant Director General for Natural Sciences underlined the increasing complexity of the decision making process accompanied by the uncertainty as a fundamental aspect of the scientific process. He also stressed the new societal demand for greater participation in science and technology decision, in other word the need of a scientific culture. He evoked also the role of the media in communicating science.

Mr Paavo Lipponen, Prime Minister, Chairman of Science and Technology Policy Council of Finland, presented the science, technology and innovation policy performance of Finland, characterised by a determined investment in knowledge and information. He highlighted the need for a broader promotion of social innovation, alongside with technological innovations, in order to ensure that social development will not diverge from the techno-economic development trend.

The importance of science for disease, the ethical dimension of science, the necessity of mutual understanding and the international co-operation, as well as the need to the establishment of Parliamentary Science and technology Commissions were evoked by. Dr. Faiq Bilall, Director for Sciences, Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO.)

Thematic Sessions

Interesting presentations from invited speakers were followed by lively debate among the participants. Several key themes were recurrent through the sessions such as increasing complexity of the decision making process, need of dialogue between different actors involved science and technology, ethics, need of a mere effective ways for communication of science, crucial importance of science education for innovation and knowledge society, new governance of science at national and international levels. The participants also exchanged and shared their national and regional experiences with issues such as legislation, technology assessment and other aspects of policy-making and learned of complexity of the decision-making in these areas. It was also noted that there are a number of key analytical lessons that can be learned from national parliamentary experiences. In particular, the successful experiences of Sweden and Finland as well as of EPTA and the Council of Europe in this area were recognised.

This brief report summarises the themes discussed and the policy implications, and concludes with a short list of policy priorities.

1. Policymakers should continue to set ambitious aims for lifelong learning and research and development, with special emphasis on funding;
2. The large-scale development of a national innovation system is an on-going process. The foremost priority in the internal development of an innovation system is continually to enhance quality, efficiency and relevance.
3. The co-operation and interaction of the innovation system with other policy sectors must be further developed and deepened
4. The conditions for basic research and strategic development of technologies should be strengthened.
5. Inter-disciplinarily and multi-disciplinarity in education and in research, as well as the cluster approach in industry and economic policy, should be improved and extended.
6. In-depth co-operation of companies, universities and research centres launched within welfare, information and communication clusters should to be expanded to other clusters, and further deepened.

7. A global perspective in science, technology and innovation policy is important. Innovations should be targeted to integrate the new and the old industries and economies.
8. More focus should be placed on deeper understanding of innovation processes and innovation in general.
9. Future work force competencies should be developed. Special care must be taken to ensure the availability of well-trained personnel to promote R&D in industry, to increase the supply of knowledge intensive services wherever needed, and to issue regulations for the protection of intellectual property, as well as other regulations which affect innovation.
10. Parliaments should further develop their own concepts through which they deal with science, technology and innovation policy. A good example of such concepts is the way the Committee for the Future operates at the Finnish Parliament among other parliamentary committees with a permanent status. An association of parliamentarians and scientists has proven in some countries to be a useful tool for contacts and exchange of information between parliamentarians and scientists. The setting up of such associations of scientists and parliamentarians is encouraged. Another example is the regional networking between parliaments in Europe through EPTA – European Parliamentary Technology Assessment Network.
11. The role of media has been acknowledged as an essential element in communicating science to the policy-makers, Parliamentarians and the public at large. The need for closer co-operation between journalists and scientists has been recognised.
12. There is an increasing tendency towards public mistrust of science and of political decision making related to science and technology development. This must be addressed through greater appropriation of science by the public, and through scientists becoming more accountable to society. Developments in biotechnology give a clear example both of the need for greater public integration into scientific decision making and of the need for education about risks and tradeoffs. It also illustrates the misuse of information technology for propaganda on both sides of a debate and the influence of economic power in shaping the research agenda. Society must be empowered to cope with high volumes of often conflicting information and must be given fora to make public views heard. This can be achieved through increased emphasis on basic science education to enhance public understanding of science, and through establishing structures for informed public participation in scientific agenda setting and decision making. Scientists must form better public communication structures to disseminate information about cutting-edge research and its implications

Conclusions and recommendations

The Round Table was very successful. The participants in the meeting valued greatly the opportunity to meet to discuss important issues related to the complexity of the decision making process. It was agreed that new forms of dialogue between the above mentioned actors can help Parliamentarians to make better law. In this context, the participants recognised that the initiative was timely and useful for the launching of a Forum of parliamentary science and technology committees, scientists, communicators of science and representatives of the civil society. The leading role of UNESCO in supporting such Forum was emphasised. Following the two days of debate and discussions, a Declaration (attached), summarising the conclusions and the recommendations of the Round Table was adopted.