

Initiative for Science in Europe

Formed in the course of a debate on the creation of the European Research Council, the ISE was set up to act as the voice of the scientific community and to promote an integrated vision of science. **Professor Federico Mayor**, Chair of the platform, explains how ISE's broad membership underscores its success

What is the primary concern of the ISE and what conditions brought about its formation?

ISE a platform of European learned societies and scientific organisations, was formed alongside the European Research Council (ERC), when leaders from several major European organisations decided to join forces to lobby for the ERC. These efforts were successful and ISE is now widely recognised for having played an instrumental role during the genesis of the ERC, encouraging the founders of ISE to maintain and develop the platform and its activities.

Science knows no boundaries and scientists are probably the most federalist of all European citizens. At a time when the organisation, structuring, regulation, and funding of research activities are increasingly taking place at a European and even worldwide level, it is necessary to provide a voice for the research community, unified across national boundaries and scientific disciplines, to express their views and advocate their needs. The primary concerns of ISE are to involve scientists in the design of European science policies; to provide a rigorous scientific advice to policy makers; and to be the voice of the scientific community to the greatest extent, not only for assessment but for prospective issues.

Was the ERC creation facilitated by the necessity to improve R&D at a European level?

The advantage of fostering basic science at a European level was recognised very early not only by scientists but also heads of national funding organisations, and politicians such as Helge Sander, the former Danish Minister, who, in 2002, under Danish Presidency of the EU, organised a conference to discuss the need for an ERC. This conference led to the creation of an expert group (ERCEG) that I chaired, whose mission was to explore options for the creation of an ERC.

Through its consultation with the scientific community and its open conferences involving all stakeholders, ISE helped to develop such a concept and to move the boundaries. For others, the support of Federation of the Societies of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (FEBS), European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) and European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO) was particularly relevant, with institutions like Euroscience, the European Science Foundation (ESF), the European

University Association and CERN, for example, notably contributing to convincing the European Commission, as well as the European Parliament and Council, to respond to the call of the scientific community, as stated in several documents. Initially, the European Commission considered that supporting frontier research through competition schemes was not part of its remit.

Many members from the ERC Scientific Council were closely associated with ISE, and therefore the very successful ERC programmes largely reflect the proposals of the scientific community as advocated by ISE. It is for this reason that investments in infrastructure, innovation and science are more necessary than ever.

What part does multidisciplinary cooperation play in your organisation, and has this allowed ISE to foster research synergy? What variety of disciplines do you combine and how wide-ranging are your members?

At this time of worldwide crisis, when radical changes to global governance are urgently required, not only to prevent irreversible damages, particularly in socially and environmentally crucial aspects, but also to successfully guide sustainable development away from market forces, scientific rigour is more necessary than ever before to aid policy decision-making.

Addressing great societal challenges such as access to health services, nutrition, ageing or climate change can only be done through multidisciplinary efforts. Social sciences, for example, can tackle appropriate policy making, and both expectations of, and impact on, citizens; as such, they are as critical as physical or biological processes. Therefore, ISE aims to promote an integrated vision of science, with its membership including European organisations representative of all communities: chemistry, physics, mathematics, material sciences, life and biomedical sciences, social sciences and education.

How has ISE developed in its aims since its original implementation?

ISE was created by individuals who were the leaders of major organisations such as EMBL, EMBO, FEBS, Euroscience, European Physical Society (EPS) and the ESF. They recognised the value of joining forces to fight for a common objective, creating the ERC. It is necessary



to pay tribute to the first President of ISE, Jose Mariano Gago, current Portuguese Minister for Science, Technology and Higher Education and one of the founding fathers of the Lisbon Agenda, who was a great leader in these early days. This group of organisations was rapidly joined by others, which shared its objective, in a loose structure. Here, I should acknowledge and emphasise, as I said before, those who financially support the platform and allowed us to develop our activities, primarily EMBL, EMBO and FEBS.

On the other hand, structuring conditions must be met for basic science to flourish: preparing the next generation of researchers, developing career paths, research infrastructures, mobility, industry-academia collaborations, etc. Concerning all these issues, ISE must speak up. Finally, ISE members are well aware of the social contract between science and society. Scientists must have a vision of science for society, creating much work for ISE, both internally and externally.

It is therefore time to evolve a more sustainable and professional structure, sharing the costs between the members of ISE. This will allow us to scale-up our activities and the number of issues that we can address simultaneously, and this is exactly what we are currently developing.

Is there any particular area of basic science that the ISE sees the need to focus on, and if so, why? What future action will this approach lead to?

We, at ISE, feel a specific responsibility towards the ERC. It is the single most successful development in European science in decades. In July 2009, a panel of independent experts evaluated the ERC; while praising its achievements, they provided recommendations to improve its functioning and delivery mechanisms and insisted on fostering its autonomy. That is exactly what ISE will do, along with our aim of contributing to the establishment and structuring of a real, functioning European Research Area.

By what means are you involving scientists in the design and implementation of European science policies, and how is this advocating strong independent scientific advice in European policy making?

ISE aims to represent the scientific community by gathering representative organisations. Consulting scientists, individually or through workshops and working groups, and expressing their views through papers and open conferences involving all stakeholders, notably the European Institutions (Commission and Parliament), are the primary means of action for ISE.

As the former Director General of UNESCO, how has this experience benefited your current position?

To be able to see the Earth as a whole; to be aware of the immense richness of cultures worldwide, the wisdom of so many people that must invent how to survive everyday; the natural resources of the planet, the beauty and perfection of nature; the necessity of more balanced sharing; and most importantly, to know what is humanity's hope: the distinctive capacity to think, to create; are parts of the poli-faceted experience of being Director General of the Intellectual Organization of the United Nations. "Unprecedented situations require unprecedented solutions," wrote Amin Maalouf, and now is the right moment to invent the future and to mobilise civil society out of silence and apathy. The scientific community must be at the forefront of this new beginning.

And finally, is there any other part of ISE's work that you wish to discuss?

Europe is once more at a turning point. It is in the midst of an existential crisis which will have deep and long-lasting consequences. Two items are on the agenda for the coming years: the financial perspectives – the EU budget – and the next Framework Programme, Horizon 2020.

Politicians everywhere in Europe are claiming, at home and on the European scene, that science and technological development are the

only way forward for our economies and societies. However, while adding new missions to the portfolio financed by the EU budget, many major EU Member States want to maintain or even decrease the budget and, at the same time, sanctuarise expenses for the Common Agricultural Policy or Structural and Cohesion funds. Who will be brave enough to speak up about the budget share for science and innovation? It is clear that without R&D, global sustainable development – the only way out of the present situation – will not take place.

As to EU funding for R&D, it is certainly possible to make it more efficient and focused to really contribute to the ERA. The scientific community has its own ideas about it and ISE will certainly aim to make them heard.

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