European governance

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PURPOSE : to present an examination of improved procedures and guidelines enhancing the use of experts for the establishment of Community policies. CONTENT : this Communication is a direct result of the White Paper on European Governance adopted in July 2001. It seeks to examine ways in which the Commission can make better use of those experts at its disposal when formulating policies. Specifically this would include scientific expertise. All things being equal experts are currently requested to perform "classical" scientific assessments, rooted in the natural or social sciences. In most cases this is fairly straightforward in which questions are addressed and the evidence considered based on uncontroversial, well-established, facts. On other occasion the evidence in not nearly so clear or evident. Take, for example, BSE and GMO's. In these cases policies have to be adopted in the face of significant uncertainty. As the Communication notes, scientific expertise is, in such cases, as much about stating what is unknown, or uncertain with differing degrees of probability, as about setting out commonly agreed and accepted views. Other examples include policy decisions relating to air quality, authorising cosmetic products, establishing automobile safety standards, determining sustainable fish catches, developing strategies to tackle unemployment and designing European research programmes. When considering such matters, the interplay between policy-makers, experts, interested parties and the public at large is a crucial part of policy-making and attention has to be focused not just on policy outcome but also on the process followed. These matters are made all the more problematic given that the Union is required to apply the precautionary principle and acknowledge the role of risk assessment and risk management when deciding policy outcomes. This Communication therefore sets out a number of objectives aimed at establishing sound principles for the gathering of expert opinion. The first objective is to help the Commission departments mobilise and exploit the most appropriate expertise with a view to establishing a sound knowledge base for better policies. The second objective is to uphold the Commission's determination that the process of collecting and using expert advice should be credible. Under the measures to be outlined the Commission is not advocating a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Rather, it aims to set out principles, guidelines and practical questions that encapsulate and promote good practices. Three core principles are thus proposed. Firstly, seeking advice of an appropriately high quality. Secondly, seeking and acting on advice from experts in an open manner and thirdly, ensuring that its methods for collecting and using expert advice is effective and proportionate. Underpinning these three core principles are a series of guidelines which include inter alia, maintaining an adequate level of in-house expertise, involving other interested departments, requiring departments to cast their nets as widely as possible in seeking appropriate expertise, assessing both mainstream and divergent views (to be supported by plausible evidence), requiring experts to declare immediately any direct or indirect interest in the issues at stake and maintaining a culture of openness vis--vis the public. In terms of implementation, the Communication foresees an evolutionary and organic process based on on-going assessments.Initial implementation measures should include inter-departmental collaboration, requesting the directorate-generals to establish procedures to assess the experience gained in implementing the guidelines, requiring directorate-generals to report on their experiences and lastly, organising in 2005, a Commission led independent evaluation of the application of the present guidelines.