Prospects for European research and technology in the 21st century

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OBJECTIVE: the Commission's communication is designed to launch a debate to identify the guidelines that will underpin the Fifth Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration activities. CONTENTS: preparation of the Fifth Framework Programme is taking place at a time of rapid and intense change. In the Commission's view, the problem of unemployment, increased globalisation and developments in the construction of Europe (IGC, EMU and enlargement) are all challenges that have to be met. That involves looking afresh at the rationale behind and process of European research. If European research is to survive, it must be more visible it terms of its tasks, simpler to use and generate more effective results. A first set of guidelines is emerging. Without affecting the continuity of recognised achievements, the substance of research topics must be revisited in the light of the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Basically, this means moving from research devoted to technological performance only to the kind of research that focuses on the citizen, as well as responding to economic and social needs. On the basis of those guidelines, the Commission is sketching out an initial vision of what the future framework programme will contain and has identified three priority themes and three horizontal programmes. 1) The thematic programmes place the emphasis both on targeting and the impact of research on the life of citizens: a) exploring the resources of the living world and the ecosystem: from the human perspective, the object will be, in particular, to acquire a better understanding of the mechanisms that support the living world and their applications, specifically in relation to health and food; from an environmental perspective, the object will be to improve our understanding of environmental mechanisms and acquire advanced technologies to protect natural resources and successfully manage pollution and waste; b) developing a user-friendly information society: this means developing internationally interoperable technologies, infrastructures, services and applications and identifying new tools to facilitate people's access to education and training; c) encouraging competitive and sustainable growth: bunched around this issue are priorities deriving from Community policies with a major impact on the competitiveness of the Union and bringing many jobs into play (agricultural policy, fisheries, transport, energy and heath). 2) The horizontal programmes contain two elements: a generic element designed to respond to common needs and secure overall coordination; and a second element integrated into the thematic programmes: a) improving human research potential: improving the training and mobility of researchers and promoting the European identity; identifying society's needs and better understanding the social consequences of research work (organisation of work, job creation, economy, education and culture); b) innovating and involving SMEs: SMEs will gain easier access to research and research outcomes if a single simplified framework is established and technology transfer mechanisms developed; c) affirming the international role of European research: direct involvement of third parties in research programmes; establishment of arrangements for cooperation at European level; definition of specific international scientific cooperation activities. 3) As far as implementation is concerned, the Commission is advocating greater selectivity of issues and a greater concentration of resources. It is arguing for a simplified decision-taking procedure, a substantial reduction in the number of programmes and the number of committees. Three main methods of intervention are envisaged: horizontal programmes, task forces open to everyone around unifying themes and mechanisms to encourage cooperation between Member States.