Roadmapping science in society

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Overview

- Preliminary findings from forthcoming GeneWatch report ‘Bioscience for Life?’ (a desk-based analysis of the role of the knowledge-based economy in influencing science policy and funding decisions)
- Some research on public perceptions
- Conclusions

The Knowledge-Based Economy

- The KBE is now the main driver for research investments across Europe: seen as key to competitiveness
- Increased science budgets – but at a price?
- Increased protectionism in knowledge (expansion of IP and patents system, incl. ‘patents on life’)
- Commitments to technology platforms (biotech, IT)
- Public-private partnerships (industry agendas with public subsidies)
- PR: promoting technologies as transformative; creation of the ‘informed consumer’
- ‘Light touch’ regulation
- Disconnection from users (shift from farms/hospitals into labs)

Some issues

- Claim making: ‘win-win’ benefits to health, wealth, sustainability
- Promises of technocratic (genomic) ‘solutions’ to hunger, obesity, cancer, crime
- No recognition of possible conflicting views/interests (e.g. big pharma v. health services; industrial v. organic farmers)
- Patenting discoveries changes nature of knowledge (not peer reviewed), research priorities (products not systems) and scientific norms (‘science as a business’ = ‘monetising IP’).
- Undermining independent expertise for risk assessment and policy advice, including research investment decisions (based on claims/hype).

Effect on research priorities

- Decisions strongly influenced by a small circle of advisors, not democratic or accountable
- Small sector of industries drive ‘vision’ (e.g. EU Technology Platforms)
- Emphasis on ‘technologies of control’ and increased public dependency on experts (to assess benefits/safety e.g. food claims)
- Sidelining social/economic issues (e.g. the ‘politics of food’)
- No critique of what technologies can actually deliver (increased hype to obtain funding)

Examples of public views

- Public skepticism about the KBE, including motivations and likely success (see: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/policy_advisers/publications/docs/rapport_strategie_de_lisbonne_en.pdf)
- Technology being developed for profits, not societal needs; lack of control over direction of science/technology; Govt/industry "*not candid with citizens*"; "*pervasive anxiety*" about potential abuse of technologies; "*a striking trust deficit*". (see: http://www.sciencehorizons.org.uk)
- Overall: Not lack of trust in science/scientists but in what they are being told and who is in control of decision-making

Views of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

- EC-funded PSx2 project: ‘Participatory Science and Scientific Participation’. See: http://www.fondazionedirittigenetici.org/psx2/psx2/
- Interviews with CSOs involved in GM crops debate (one perspective).
- Viewed themselves and broader society as fundamentally excluded from debates about science
- Not anti-science: ‘science in society’ approach
- Recommendations for improved participation in decision-making about science and technology

Ways forward

- Need: more democratic and accountable science policy and research investment decisions
- Involve broader publics in deciding what is the ‘public interest’
- Value the ‘non-instrumental’ roles of science
- Recognise complexity of problems and need for diversity of research
- Problem-led, not technology-led, priority setting
- Recognise that conflicts in priorities/needs exist: trade-offs need democratic, political decisions
- Fund counter-expertise and co-operative research