



Statement of Ethics in Research

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Concerns about Ethics in European Research Policy

Introduction

The European Union spends significant amounts of public money on research. This is currently done under the 7th Framework Programme (FP7); but there is also funding for research coming from other EU budgets. However, in this paper, we focus on the Research Framework Programme.

The main areas of research funded under FP7 are:

- Health
- Food, Agriculture and Biotechnology
- Information and Communication Technologies
- Nanosciences, Nanotechnologies, Materials and new Production Techniques
- Energy
- Environmental (including climate change)
- Transport (including Aeronautics)
- Socio-economic sciences and Humanities
- Security
- Space
- Nuclear science

Each of these in different ways raise social questions - certainly insofar as they try to address societal challenges.

Despite this, the legal basis of the 7th Framework Programme only addresses ethical concerns from the perspective of bio-ethics.

Whilst we are not proposing to elaborate here the other ethical dimension which arise in all of the main research areas above, it is clear from the list that bio-ethics is too narrow a lens to see this through.

Ethical concerns

To take only one of the areas included above - that of Security: it has been demonstrated¹ that the involvement of large industrial actors in the design and programming of the research agenda overlaps significantly with the list of beneficiaries under the programme. In other words, there is a significant concern

¹ Ben Hayes, Arming Big Brother, Transnational Institute and Statewatch, April 2006, accessed on 10 May 2011 at: <http://www.statewatch.org/analyses/bigbrother.pdf> and Ben Hayes, NeoConOpticon - The EU Security - Industrial Complex, Transnational Institute and Statewatch, 2009, accessed on 10 May 2011 at: <http://www.statewatch.org/analyses/neoconopticon-report.pdf>

regarding the conflict of interest involved in deciding what to spend public money on and in allocating that money subsequently.

The involvement of citizens, civil society actors and, indeed, elected representatives of citizens in the development of this programme was minimal.

As at April 2011, just one contractor - and one who was involved in the discussions around the development of this research programme right from the beginning - is involved in 40% of the projects funded.

The concept of security which underlies the programme is heavily biased towards technological and military answers and does not significantly address social and political questions which, in turn, might lead to more sustainable and more socially acceptable answers

The discussion about ethics in the conception of future security research is being focused on privacy concerns which are relevant and important but which only tell part of the story.

The question of the development - with EU public money - of technology which has primarily or significantly military application but which is deemed to be for 'internal security' is not being addressed in any kind of meaningful public debate.

The involvement of companies in these programmes which supply weapons and munitions to third country governments who, in turn, it has been shown in the recent uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, have used that technology to oppress their populations raises real questions of complicity in war crimes on the part of participants in these programmes.

A Possible Approach

The Legal Basis for the next Research Framework Programme

We would propose that the approach to ensuring that the ethical issues raised by each and every research programme and project are addressed effectively should not be by including in the legal basis reference to specific ethical questions (as now in the case of bio-ethics). The draw-back of this approach is that it always lags behind the recognition of new ethical issues.

Rather, the next Research Framework Programme should include the following:

- A general requirement that each annual research programme (relating to each of the different research areas) explicitly identifies the way in which it intends to address any ethical questions arising from any of the projects funded
- A general requirement that each research proposal to be funded has to include a detailed assessment of the ethical issues raised and the means by which they will be addressed in the research design; this may, in appropriate cases involve:
 - Participation of suitably qualified specialists in the research whose role will be to monitor the ethical dimension of results as they emerge and propose solutions to ethical dilemmas;
 - Participation of civil society actors and /or citizens' panels who are to discuss the ethical dilemmas arising and to propose what would be publicly acceptable responses
- A general requirement not to fund projects which (either in the conception of their basic purpose or in the design of the research as outlined) do not comply with either the values of the European Union as set out in the Treaties or the standards enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights or where the participation of some of the participants may lay the EU open to claims that it supports individuals or organisations that are involved in acts deemed illegal under international law.

- An advisory body which monitors the implementation of the safeguards relating to ethics which should include both experts on ethics, civil society actors with appropriate expertise and experience, and citizens representatives.
- A requirement for an annual report on the ethics in EU Research which analyses the issues raised by programmes and projects funded and implemented throughout that year to be submitted to an appropriate committee of the European Parliament.
- A commitment to developing (within the first year after the coming into force of the next Research Framework Programme) an ethics assessment tool to be used for programmes and projects at every key decision-making stage. The development of this tool should involve suitably experienced scientists and legal experts with expertise in the field of ethics and be done in consultation with civil society.