

## interview claudia neubauer

# Collective wisdom

Fondation Sciences Citoyennes wants science to be closer to the real concerns of citizens. In Paris, **Tania Rabesandratana** spoke with the organisation's director **Claudia Neubauer** about her fight for unbiased, participatory research.

Science in Society was Framework 7's funding programme dedicated to reflection and debate on science and technology in our society. It had a budget of €330 million for 2007-13, but the programme has been axed in the proposal for Horizon 2020, the follow-up to Framework 7 for 2014-20.

Fondation Sciences Citoyennes, a French not-for-profit association, is among those who are fighting to reverse the programme's removal. The organisation, founded in Paris in 2002 by a group of researchers, has urged the European Commission to create a comparable funding stream for Horizon 2020 with a €1-billion budget, or 1.25 per cent of the proposed €80bn total budget.

"There is €20bn for industrial leadership, while science in society has not even been continued," says Claudia Neubauer, the director of the foundation. "The

Framework Programme is a public research programme, so it should fund research in the public interest. The industry focus allows a limited number of actors to be important on the market, but crushes a big quantity of smaller actors," she explains.

Neubauer has a particular bone to pick with the Commission's large research programmes for industry, such as the Joint Technology Initiatives and other public-private partnerships. She says that many funding initiatives are often based on trends and "fashionable" research that industry wants to take forward, with little consideration about the quality of the research and its relevance

beyond industrial competition.

"[These initiatives] don't necessarily respond to the needs of the people or the environment, they are globalised and not local," Neubauer says.

Fondation Sciences Citoyennes proposes to open up what it terms the tête-à-tête between industry and academia, and to involve more non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations. One of the association's strategies to achieve this is through promoting participatory research.

The foundation has plenty of experience in this field. When the public authorities of the Paris region approached the association seeking ideas to promote citizen science, Fondation Sciences Citoyennes suggested setting up a funding programme that would bring together academics and non-governmental organisations, such as patient associations, to carry out joint research.

The result, a fund to support partnerships between research institutions and citizens, was launched in Paris in 2005 and distributes €1.5m every year. Two other French regions, Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Bretagne, have since set up comparable programmes.

Neubauer believes that involving non-governmental organisations through participatory research is one way for EU-funded science to get closer to the needs of the people and to the environment. She says that developing technology should be a means to achieve a societal project, not an end in itself. "The dominant understanding of innovation among our decision-makers is about hi-tech rather than low-tech or 'no-tech' solutions," she says. "But narrowing down innovation to scientific papers, products and patents does not respond to the general interest."

At the EU level, the foundation has already convinced the European Commission to create a funding tool called Research for the Benefit of Specific Groups—Civil Society Organisation, which is similar to the French partnership initiative. This type of funding can be made available in specific calls for proposals in annual work programmes, but remains underused, Neubauer says.

"We are fighting for it to be better known," she says, adding that the Commission should decide on a set percentage of its funding to go to this kind of participatory research. However, she is uncertain whether this alone would have enough impact. "The master narratives don't change and the projects that are more participatory remain marginal or cosmetic," she says.

While the EU institutions dutifully seek to include all "stakeholders" in the policy-making process, Neubauer insists: "Why not ask citizens what their priorities are? We want to consider the collective intelligence of citizens, even if they are lay people with no particular stake."

*More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com*

## Claudia Neubauer

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- \* 2002: Masters in science journalism at Université Paris 7, France
- \* Since 2002: Co-founder and director of the Fondation Sciences Citoyennes (Citizen Sciences Foundation) in Paris, France
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