

THIRTY YEARS OF VIENNA AND TEN OF BUDAPEST: WHERE ARE WE IN LATIN AMERICA?

In August 1979, policy makers and members of the international scientific and technological community, summoned by the United Nations, met in Vienna in a conference dedicated to examine the world situation in science and technology, and define the steps necessary to accelerate its dominance by developing countries, as part of their search for progress. The conference constituted an opportunity for each country, large or small, to examine the state of the situation of science and technology. The result of such examination was not encouraging for the majority of developing countries. In spite of important efforts made in past decades, few of them had been able to dominate scientific and technological knowledge, and put it at the service of their societies as a source of wealth.

The Vienna Conference took place in a moment when the dependence theory was at its height and, naturally, many of the development problems were to be “blamed” on the dominant countries. The Vienna Plan of Action and the instruments created as a result of the negotiations, and which reflect in some way that sentiment of dependence, tried to overcome the existing deficiencies, but in practice were of short duration due to the lack of political will of all countries.

The Budapest Conference, summoned by UNESCO and ICSU in 1999, took place at a moment when the world was influenced by the magic of the “free market”, the majority of developing countries were taking roads towards privatization, diminishing the role of the State (including the reduction of its contribution to science and technology), free trade and other “neo-liberal” measures severely questioned today by all governments, many in demagogical ways, without much doing for their societies and even less for science, technology and innovation. At the same time, in Budapest, the term innovation and the concept of innovation systems, practically non-existing in Vienna, were in full swing, and the ways in which countries, its organizations and enterprises acquired competitiveness, were better understood.

Three decades have passed since Vienna and one since Budapest, but our science, technology and innovation indicators, while having improved in many countries, are far from what is desired and rather they keep distancing themselves

from developed countries and several developing ones. Our universities, with exceptions, continue in subsidiary positions in the indicators of excellence and quality. In general, our scientific, technological and innovation efforts are slow and the gap that separates us from development grows more and more.

A recent study of the opinion of science, technology and innovation policy leaders, undertaken under the auspices of IDRC of Canada, shows clearly that, indeed, there have been many advances in the application of adopted policies in the past years, but there exists a large number of limitations that must be overcome through the adoption of new and more decisive national policies.

The developing countries that have progressed or are in that path, such as China or India, and nearer to us Brazil, did not require the pompous declarations of Vienna or Budapest, but have reached important goals as a result of their own efforts and decisions. In past decades the same path was followed by the so-called Asian Tigers.

It is not that the Declarations of Vienna and Budapest are not useful to guide the countries, since they are the result of comparing, analyzing, and suggesting ways stemming from live experiences, and constitute cooperation consensus that are important; what happens is that these declarations, without a will to apply them, are only a “salute to the flag”. The recent Regional Declaration adopted on the occasion of the ten years from the Budapest Conference, clearly recognizes that the first step towards the dominance of science, technology and innovation depends on each individual country.

At this moment of transition towards the age of knowledge and given the urgent need to face development challenges in a difficult social and economic environment, it is time that the countries of Latin America take new and brave decisions to re-examine their scientific and technological efforts and define new and original paths, especially when research and innovation have become more complex processes and require of new approaches for the definition of policies and strategies.

CARLOS AGUIRRE BASTOS
National Academy of Sciences of Bolivia
MAHABIR P. GUPTA
Executive Director, Interciencia Association