

## SCIENCE IN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS

The third week of September, the 10 years of the Scientific Initiative of the Millennium (SIM) were celebrated in Chile. The Initiative was created in 1999 with the intention of establishing scientific centers of excellence to contribute to the advancement in key areas for the national development. The program intended to develop science through the creation of these large centers, in addition to potentiating individual projects of researchers in small groups. The latter, generally driven by curiosity and time enduring, have been crucial for the application of knowledge since, as it is well known, many commercially useful and socially beneficial applications derive from discoveries arrived at with no definite intention.

In the last years there has been a large increase in the financing of research at large centers, while that of individual projects from the Fondecyt Program has remained stagnant. The 450 new projects financed in 1995 were reduced to 350 in 1997, stayed around this number until 2006, to reach 400 approved in the 2009 call for projects. Currently, only about 60% of the needed funds are available for individual projects, but their number is 10 times larger than those of associative research.

We do not mean that the SIM would not be beneficial, but the truth is that the excitement resulting from these initiatives has made us forget that the basis of science rests upon the individual projects. The due balance in financing of both types of projects should constitute a priority strategy for any country, a matter that has not been properly discussed nor appears as a concern in the programs of presidential candidates. Lately, it has been proposed to increase the investment in Fondecyt's programs, as only half of the project applications are approved. The percentage of approval has remained around 35%, and only thanks to the funds obtained through a protest of the scientific com-

munity, in October 2007, this amount got close to 44% in 2008, going back to 40% in 2009. The result? The country is wasting great ideas. In the 2009 call for projects five of them considered as "outstanding" and 327 qualified as "good" were not funded. On the other hand, the Fondecyt's initiation program for young scientists was affected this year by a 26% reduction in the number of funded projects, which will have repercussions, among others, in the renewal of human resources at universities.

There is agreement on the need to increase the investment in science, technology and innovation (STI), which in Chile should be above the current 0.7% of the GNP. However, the attempts have failed. Ricardo Lagos promised to reach 1.2% and Michele Bachelet 1%. Similarly, the hope to increase the number of active scientists (to reach 60,000) has also been frustrated. Studies indicate that their number increased from 1342 in 1994 to 2250 in 2005.

It is surprising that the presidential candidates have not yet announced their thoughts with regard to the institutionalization that the country needs in order to carry out its STI program. The present government did not fulfill its promise to elaborate a report after consultation with the universities and other relevant actors. In Chile, there are no channels for the scientific community to participate in the decision making process regarding scientific development. While we have insisted on this point, the efforts made by the Council of Scientific Societies in order to generate an institutionalism for science -at the cabinet level- have not received appropriate attention by the government, by CONICYT nor by the Innovation Council.

The presidential candidates should make public, soon, their general guidelines and commitments in these fundamental matters for the national development.

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