PERTINENCE AND VALIDATION OF SCIENCE

The dilemma between pertinence and quality has been, for a long time, one of the preponderant aspects of the validation of scientific activity in the so-called developing countries. These two characteristics do not necessarily exclude each other, but often constitute motives for discrepancies, dissatisfaction and controversies. From a rather simplistic point of view, the dilemma results, on the one hand, from the lack of sufficient financial resources to satisfy the requirements made by the different actors involved, whether researchers, institutions, governments, social groups, etc., and, on the other hand, from the human need that the criteria and strength of one or the other prevail.

When the sector of science and technology became organized in the Latin American and Caribbean countries, which took place to a large extent under the initiative of international organizations, the newly created responsible organisms began planning and organizing the activities, focusing their goals on a combination of the main needs perceived for each country and the availability of intellectual and physical resources. In most cases, already active research lines as well as the main national development planes predominated. As the latter changed with successive regimes, research lines tended to perpetuate themselves, based on the criterion that all that is done well is valid and that on no account a productive scientific activity ought to be dismantled. The concept of quality prevailed, validated by the standing in national and international measuring systems.

One of the most eloquent results of this situation was the configuration of national science and technology plans structured to a very large extent in a participative manner by researchers themselves, plans that corresponded to large listings of their own activities and interests. Official involvement did not delay. The strategy of agreements by sectors was implemented to attempt the effective incorporation of the potential demands from the productive establishment in project formulation, in this manner creating work agendas where demand and offer would be coupled.

In some countries the planning has resulted in clear advances inasmuch as personnel training and the execution of projects with a positive balance in the economic and the strategic aspects. In such cases the adjustment between the availability of human resources, the installed research and development capacities, and the existence of productive enterprises and their markets is obvious.

In other countries, the results have been meager, due to the lack of appropriate development of the chain. Either human resources have not been trained, the necessary installed capacity is nonexistent, the producers are not present or do not find the necessary elements to trust the yields of their investments, or several or all of these factors take place at the same time.

When things are not working, then pertinence is invoked. The main question becomes: Which is the pertinent research that should be carried out? The answer, or rather, the answers will depend upon the approach taken by whoever gives them. Quality as a concept of pertinence results simplistic and inadequate, as does the availability of human resources. Productivity and success of the individual researcher or group do not surpass the limits of the laboratory or the institution where the work is carried out.

This limits to two the number of sources of pertinence for scientific and technological activities. One is the demand made by an important component of the productive sector, which in our countries are government-controlled enterprises or industries that import technologies and supplies. The other is the vision held by rulers concerning the path to be followed by society and the social and economic development of their countries, always framed as the clamor of society. In the end what counts is never anything but to the interests of the dominant groups.

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