

Latin America's contribution to global economic growth can be potentiated by regional cooperation in Science and Technology policies

Dr. Lino Barañao. Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation. Argentina.

Latin America is, at present, not seen as a global leader in innovation and S&T policies. However, this has not been always the case. Thousands of years ago, pre-Columbian cultures were able to develop sophisticated and sustainable agriculture systems that involved accurate calendars and the development of crops such as potato, tomato and corn. These crops are now a basic food supply of the world population and involve markets worth billions of dollars a year, far more valuable than the gold taken by the Spanish conquerors.

Latin America can recover its role as a dynamic actor in innovation; as a place in which innovation is offered and demanded.

However, in order to achieve this goal several conditions should be fulfilled.

First, efforts should be made at the national level to increase the expenditure in R&D in terms of the GDP. Although countries such as Brazil have been able to significantly increase the science budget, still the combined budgets of Latin-American countries are comparable to those of single multinational companies.

The second condition is to improve the coupling between the generation of knowledge and the generation of wealth through innovation in the productive sectors. In this regard there are already examples indicating a marked improvement.

In the case of Argentina, the long standing tradition in scientific excellence in biomedical science, evidenced by the three Nobel Prizes awarded to Argentinean scientists in the fields of medicine and chemistry, has, in the last decades, led to the development of biotech companies which are exporting recombinant human proteins to global markets.

Thanks to the continuous support to some technological sectors, Argentina is an international competitor in the provision of experimental nuclear reactors and satellites.

Similar successful examples of locally developed technologies and the creation of technology-based enterprises are found in other LA countries like the development of

salmon aquaculture in Chilli off shore oil drilling in Brazil. However, it is clear that the efforts at the national level are no longer sufficient to achieve a significant advancement into the knowledge based economy and therefore LA countries must rely on a strong international cooperation at all levels: bilateral, regional and bi regional.

International cooperation in S&T has usually taken the form of collaborations in basic science projects and formation of human resources through exchanges and schools.

There are several examples of fruitful bilateral and regional cooperation at this level. Furthermore, the Biotech UE Mercosur project, funded by the European Union, aimed at fostering innovation in food production through introduction of biotechnology in the four LA countries members of the Mercosur, is a proof of concept of the potential of bi-regional cooperation.

However, in order to produce the quantum leap required to place LA as an active player in innovation, we should advance one step further into international cooperation in S&T policies.

In the last decade there has been a process of internalization of innovation policies centered in the inclusion of intellectual property chapters in bilateral trade agreements.

However, cooperation in policy making should advance into the process by which countries set priorities, design instruments and support the implementation of jointly defined policy objectives. Policy harmonization is, on the other hand, an extremely difficult process among countries with asymmetric capabilities. Therefore, appropriate mechanisms are required for identifying international priorities and forms of collaboration and cooperation.

In the case of Latin America, supporting a regional dialogue for S&T and innovation policies could represent a promising way forward to support innovation dynamism and diffusion in the region, to foster the generation of dynamic capabilities, and to increase trade opportunities. Regionalism in this context is not a synonym of “closeness”. Probably the concept of “open regionalism” which faced hard times in trade integration, could be revamped through the S&T regional perspective.

The rationale for supporting regional cooperation in S&T policies are manifold. Establishing a regional agenda for science, technology and innovation in a context of developing economies reinforces the commitments at the individual country level to

support and implement actions; it opens spaces for the design and implementation of supranational projects which go beyond the capacities of each single country; it allows reaching a critical mass in terms of human and financial resources and it strengthens the negotiation capacities within countries and in bilateral or multilateral negotiations. Furthermore, the agreements on long term goals prevent the fluctuations in S&T policies often seen in the region after a change in the administrations, thus supporting the transition of innovation policies from Government policies to State policies.

Latin American countries face common challenges such as, to identify ways of facing the energy crisis, to diversify their production structure and upgrade natural resource based production to boost average productivity while respecting environmental and social challenges. In addition, the regional development of the new technological platforms such as biotechnology, nanotechnology and information and communications technologies (ITCs) will not only solve problems in key areas that have a global impact, such as health, energy and agriculture, but will also develop new business opportunities.

Coordination of S&T policies at the regional level is thus a requirement to tap the enormous potential of LA to actively contribute to global economic growth..