



Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie
van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten



ACADÉMIE ROYALE
DES SCIENCES, DES LETTRES ET DES BEAUX-ARTS
DE BELGIQUE

JOINT COMMUNICATION FROM ARB-KVAB: “THE ACADEMIES PLEAD FOR AN ACCELERATED TRANSITION TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE”

Thursday January 14, 2021

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a broad consensus on the need to quickly and vigorously combat climate change, seriously threatening our society and the ecosystems on which we depend. At that time, however, it was difficult to imagine what the unfolding of a global crisis could bring about.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated this! It exposed the extreme vulnerability of our advanced societies. Not only did the virus cause a global health crisis, but it also paralyzed the economy and created major social problems, hitting the most vulnerable populations in a harder way. This crisis also raised awareness of the critical tasks that are essential for the proper functioning of our society and whose importance is often underestimated. Finally, the crisis reminded us of the importance of solidarity as opposed to individualism. The indispensable role of the government, guaranteeing solidarity and pursuing the common interest, previously all too often undervalued, has been underlined.

To get the pandemic under control, public authorities at European Union, State and Regional level have succeeded in mobilizing an enormous number of resources in record time, while it proved impossible to make a comparable financial effort to tackle climate change. Yet this threat is much greater than that of the pandemic, but its urgency is perceived to be less stringent because of its widely differing time scale.

Faced with such a situation, which is critical both today and, in the future, the Academies cannot remain passive. Their role in preserving and promoting scientific knowledge, contributing to the progress, prosperity and well-being of the society to which they belong, makes them important players in this difficult period, in which the population and those in power are in need of informed positions, independent of any individual, political or economic interest.

For this reason, both Belgian academies, the “Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België” (KVAB) and the “Académie royale de Belgique” (ARB), decided to join forces and reflect

on the different and interdependent issues that arise. Based on a long-term vision, both Academies make their expertise available to contribute to the correct assessment of the issues and to define the paths to be followed to manage the great transition that Europe and Belgium in particular are facing. From the outset, this approach has been supported by the European academic associations, of which these Academies are members. The intention is to cover all areas, in close collaboration with the Academies of Medicine.

As an example, the European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC) has published a very complete position paper¹, which can count on our approval. This document emphasizes the need to base all actions and decisions on scientific knowledge and underlines the absolute necessity to achieve economic recovery, taking into account the urgency of addressing the climate issue. The European Recovery Plan, based on the Green Deal, must be the benchmark². Only coherent and ambitious measures at the level of the European Union and its leadership can achieve the necessary goals, not only for the EU itself but also on a world scale. The recommendations of the IPCC (GIEC) on climate change and those of the IBEPS³ on the conservation of biodiversity should serve as a guideline, taking into account the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The challenges we face are so vast and complex that all sciences, both the human and the exact sciences, must do their part in diagnosing, defining goals and implementing solutions. Even though the diagnoses and objectives are already relatively clear and are being refined, the practical implementation of the solutions poses a particularly significant challenge where existing or emerging technologies will play a major role. The difficult choice of technologies and scenarios for their implementation must be made in a strictly scientific approach, without any ideological consideration. This is precisely what the joint working group will focus most of its approach on. The working group will have the support of the European Association of Academies of Applied Sciences, Technologies and Engineering (Euro-CASE), which has taken a position⁴ on this topic that is fully consistent with the proposed approach.

Euro-CASE has played an important role in the past and continues to do so, in the Scientific Advisory Mechanism (SAM) for the European Commission. We mention in particular the actions and recommendations of Euro-CASE on two very important issues: the transition to carbon-free energy and the digital society. The energy transition is probably the most complex global problem that needs to be solved in the time available to achieve the set goals. And apart from the technological complexity, the financing needs, the ability to implement technologies, nothing can happen if one cannot count on the support of the population to make difficult decisions that affect their way of life. If one does not take into account the social and cultural consequences of this policy and if social equity, solidarity and the values to which the population is attached are not taken care of, any necessary decision will inevitably be doomed to failure. The role of the Academies, with their many

¹ https://easac.eu/fileadmin/PDF_s/Covid-19/EASAC_Covid19Recovery_Web_29_May.pdf

² Session keynote of U. von der Leyen at the US National Academy of Medicine 50th anniversary, Oct 19 2020

Responding to global crises: Future directions in science and policymaking to address complex threats to society
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_1952

³ Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services: <https://ipbes.net/>

⁴ https://www.euro-case.org/wp-content/uploads/Eurocase/PDF/covid19/EuroCASE_Position-Paper-Economy-Recovery-09102020.pdf

multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary ramifications, which extend beyond exact sciences and technology, is all the more important.

In terms of the two main challenges identified, Belgium is still far from being the best student in the class in the European Union. Despite its relatively modest size, however, the quality and quantity of skills available to Belgium should enable our country to position itself among the reference countries, both in these areas and in all others.

Our two academies join forces and are available to our society in order to contribute to the achievement of the objectives set in the framework of the European Green Deal. But they cannot do this on their own! Strengthened by their links with the scientific, cultural, economic, industrial and political spheres, they make a solemn appeal to the authorities, to all actors of civil society and in particular to business and industry associations from all areas, to rise to the challenge by resolutely embarking on the road to sustainable development, despite all difficulties laying ahead.