

TA and the Regions: the Walloon experiment

10 years of activity of EMERIT

by Patricia Vendramin and Gérard Valenduc

EMERIT is the acronym of “Expériences de Médiation et d’Evaluation dans la Recherche et l’Innovation Technologique”: Experiments of mediation and evaluation in research and technological innovation. The project started in 1992, and consists of a mission entrusted by the Walloon Minister of Research and Technology to the Work & Technology Research Centre at the Fondation Travail-Université (FTU) in Namur, Belgium. The assignments given to EMERIT in 1992 were to promote awareness and to create a favourable climate towards technology assessment (TA) in the Walloon Region, and to support initiatives of mediation between research and the civil society. In the area of technology assessment, the Walloon and Flemish Regions have developed different strategies, with different levels of success, as explained in this article. EMERIT’s assignment resulted in a pluri-annual programme of activities: exploratory studies, publications, organisation of public events (conferences, workshops).

In the cradle of technology assessment

In 1992, on the initiative of the Walloon Minister of Research and Technology the project EMERIT – Expériences de Médiation et d’Evaluation dans la Recherche et l’Innovation Technologique was started at the Work & Technology Research Centre at the Fondation Travail-Université (FTU) in Namur, Belgium¹. Its aim was to promote awareness and create a favourable climate towards technology assessment (TA). FTU was selected as the host institution of EMERIT because of its experience in research on technology and society, and its close cooperation with social organisations.

During the first years (1992-95), EMERIT’s activities were marked by the discussion on the perspectives of institutionalising technology assessment. At the time, the subject was on the agenda at the Walloon level², the Belgian federal level and the European level.

At this point in time, the European Commission was favouring the constitution of a European technology assessment area, so to

speak, by the creation of networks of national and regional initiatives, involving parliamentary TA institutions, TA consultative bodies, emerging TA projects and specialised research centres. EMERIT took an active part in this networking, particularly in international conferences and European groups of experts.

In 1994, the Federal Science Policy Office (SSTC-DWTC, which is responsible for research domains that have not been transferred to the Regions and for national coordination of R&D) organised the first “Belgian conference on technology assessment”, to which EMERIT actively contributed. SSTC-DWTC’s objectives were to both restructure and reinforce existing TA skills in universities and research centres, and to motivate the political and institutional world.

In the Walloon Region, various scenarios of institutionalisation of TA were envisaged and studied, even before the creation of EMERIT: creating a regional parliamentary office, creating a “prospective and assessment” cell in the public administration of research and technology (DGTRE, Direction Générale des Technologies et de la Recherche), or again, a model based on social consultation, taking advantage of the experience of *Stichting Technologie-Vlaanderen* (STV) in Flanders. STV is a foundation for technology assessment, created in 1984 by the Flemish socio-economic regional council, granted by the Flemish Government and managed by the social partners (employers and trade-unions). STV developed several experiments of participative technology assessment, however limited to the area of new technology and work. The STV activities and methods directly address workers, trade unions and managers and try to involve them in a constructive assessment of technological options and their consequences for the Flemish economy and society.

In the Walloon debate on the institutionalisation of TA, EMERIT tried to promote the concept of technology assessment based on a broad social consultation, specifically involving the social partners, the regional authorities, the world of research and civil society. The examples of Flanders, Baden-Württemberg and other European regions were an excellent stimulus. These views were expressed in one of the first EMERIT publications entitled “Eva-

luation des choix technologiques et régions” (Technology assessment and regions), and in a conference organised in October 1993.

In 1994, the Walloon Region decided to institutionalise a consultative TA mission in the Walloon Council for Science Policy (CPS). The CPS is a consultative body linked to the Economic and Social Council of the Walloon Region. The CPS advises the Walloon Government on science, research and technological development. It is composed of the social partners and representatives of the research world (universities, high schools, public research centres) and the regional administration DGTRE. The TA mission consisted of two tasks: to prepare advice of the CPS on TA-related topics; and to manage an experimental research programme, granted by DGTRE and subcontracted to universities and research centres by way of calls for proposals. A small cell for TA-coordination was set up under the authority of the CPS. Relatively limited resources were allocated for these TA activities, but this mission was intended to grow if the players in the CPS (social partners, universities and high schools) mobilise for its development.

Exploring new channels and promoting awareness with a broader audience

As these institutional initiatives were going forward, EMERIT continued its exploratory studies and awareness activities, with the constant support of the regional authorities, i.e. the Directorate General for Technology and Research (DGTRE). The EMERIT newsletter, the first issue of which dates back to June 1992, has always been a showcase for projects and analyses.

In the EMERIT publications and conferences, a large range of themes relating to the interaction between technology and society have been covered in the last 10 years:

- the regional dimension of technology assessment;
- interfaces between research and society;
- environmental assessment methods;
- scientific communication and public opinion;
- innovation, environment and employment;
- new outlets for telework;
- sustainable regional development;
- distance working and the information society;

- technology, flexible organisation and employment;
- innovation in services and implications for regional policies;
- information technologies in the non-profit sector.

The social dialogue, the regional dimension and the involvement of players concerned with innovation are the guidelines of this programme. EMERIT addresses a target audience of persons, groups, institutions “in charge of projects and initiatives”, including scientific institutions, administrations and public agencies, social organisations, economic agents, policymakers. This is an audience that is often considered intermediary, insofar as it constitutes a relay both within the institutions and towards the public at large. This audience has never stopped growing: today the EMERIT newsletter is sent to 1550 addresses, 350 of them outside the country. Addressing these specific “intermediary or relay groups” has contributed to put emphasis on the regional dimension of EMERIT, for this audience consists of everyday actors of regional development. Even when studied themes had a broader scope (e.g. telework, flexible working, sustainability), the EMERIT activities have always focused on their regional dimension, putting forward room to manoeuvre for regional actors. The Work & Technology Centre of FTU has also carried out one of the research projects of the TA-programme of the CPS, on information technology and new work forms in the printing and publishing sector.

Promoting public debate

As years have gone by, the need for assessment of technological options as well as the need for public debate on scientific issues has grown. Increasingly, technology has made a mark on the professional and domestic worlds. It has been, and it still is, the source of both profound upsets and new opportunities. Much rationalisation in industry bears the sign of technologies. Whether in industrial or commercial activities, or those concerned with health or public service, work has changed profoundly and most occupations have been revamped. Some aspects of scientific progress have opened up promising horizons and others have given rise to aggravated risks. The pressure on the environment reached alarming proportions in many

fields. More and more groups became sensitive to the need of assessment and debate on these issues and challenges. In Europe, the audience of TA institutions, not only the parliamentary offices, has grown. In countries where TA is not explicitly institutionalised, such as in Belgium, tools and methods of TA have however been adopted by other institutions: consultative bodies, research centres, social groups.

Most parliamentary TA institutions have adjusted to the new circumstances. In Denmark, in the Netherlands, in Germany, in France and more recently in Austria, Switzerland and Finland, these institutions opened up to public discussion and began investing more in direct participation: citizen panels, consensus conferences, scenario workshops, participatory surveys, etc. Since December 2001, the Flemish Parliament has set up a new institution (VIWTA, Vlaamse Instelling voor Wetenschappelijk en Technologisch Aspectenonderzoek), responsible for organising this kind of direct participation. VIWTA is the only new institutional event for many years in the Belgian TA-landscape.

Public debate is no longer one option among many others. It has become an objective in itself. The context is favourable for several reasons. The effect of technologies on work and daily life is more than ever a source of controversy. Discussions on the implementation of the precautionary principle renew the requirement of better interaction between experts and civil society.

And in the meanwhile, what happened in the Walloon region? Under the authority of successive governments and with the support of the regional administration (DGTRE), research and innovation policy has opened up to greater involvement of the players directly concerned: companies, research centres and universities, high schools, local development institutions. The organisation of consultations on R&D issues has become more usual, for instance through a series of Research Meetings (1996-1997) and the Prometheus programme (1999-2001). From June 1996 to November 1997, the Council for Science Policy (CPS) and the regional administration (DGTRE) organised a series of 10 one-day conferences-debates, open to a wide public. Each conference was organised on the same pattern: keynote speeches, includ-

ing foreign experts; round table with representatives of concerned stakeholders; discussion with the attendance. The subjects of the debates were:

- research listening to the civil society;
- organisation of the research system;
- scope and means of R&D public financing in the Region;
- industrial cooperative research centres;
- sectoral and thematic orientations of regional public research;
- valorisation of research results;
- evaluation of the impacts of R&D on society;
- social and cultural conditions of innovation;
- internationalisation of R&D;
- role of the researcher in society.

About 900 participants attended at least one of the meetings. They were coming from industry, universities, public agencies and administrations, government, education, trade unions and other social organisations. The CPS published a synthesis of the contributions and debates and issued key policy recommendations for the future of research and technological development in the Region. The Prometheus project, carried out by the Region within the European programme RITTS (Regional innovation and technology transfer systems) in 1999-2000, can be considered as one of the follow-up initiatives of this broad consultation and discussion process.

In addition, the Region has significantly increased its promotional efforts in scientific and technical culture, focusing particularly on youth. However, although concern is still felt for a broader social debate on the technological challenges, it is sometimes expressed more discretely. As concerns the technology assessment assignment given to CPS, it has not yet reached the visibility or impact that one might have expected from a regional experience in institutionalising technology assessment.

As a result, the Walloon situation is paradoxical today: while expertise is growing in several research centres in the "technology and society" field, regional initiatives on TA-institutionalisation are more or less at a standstill.

A ten-year evaluation

The 10th anniversary of EMERIT is an opportunity to do an evaluation of all these developments. We have chosen to do this by means of

a publication (in French) entitled ‘La société à l’épreuve de la technologie’ (Society coping with the technology)³. This is a collection of the articles, grouped by theme, that appeared in the EMERIT newsletter. An introductory article presents each theme, putting it in a perspective that helps identify and analyse the way the issues were perceived and how they have evolved in the last 10 years.

The first part of the publication gives an overview of the various aspects of life in society that are affected by technological changes. This is called “The Omnipresence of Technologies in Society” and includes three chapters:

- Work and employment coping with information and communication technologies
- Technologies and transformation of living environments
- Mastering the environment: from a healing approach to eco-conception.

The second part deals with technological innovation as a driving force for regional development. It does not look exclusively at the engine, but also at the drivers – in other words, piloting innovation. How can innovation strategies and technological controversies be analysed? How can an anticipatory approach to technology assessment be promoted? EMERIT suggests that research and innovation policies must be accompanied so that, upstream and downstream, they integrate the societal dimension that is inherent to any technological project. This second part includes two chapters:

- Understanding and negotiating technological choices
- Accompanying innovation and making it a tool of regional development.

Insofar EMERIT activities were mainly devoted to awareness building and exploratory studies, it is difficult to assess to what extent they had a direct impact on the decision making process in the Region. The indirect impact is however important: contributing to an innovative culture, fostering consultation processes and public debates, focusing on the societal dimension of technological changes.

In the conclusions of the book, we describe three areas where EMERIT brought a significant contribution in the Region:

- The need for better interfaces between science, technology and society.

- The understanding of the shaping role of technological tools and options in social relations, particularly in the economic activity and the world of work.
- The recurrent question of the democratisation process of technological options, in a new context where risk assessment and precaution become an emerging concern for policy-makers.

With this publication, we have tried to show that the problematic of “science, technology and society” concretely concerns all citizens and all regional players. Is a new political culture of science and technology developing? What will be the reaction to it? Even after 10 years, it appears that there is still a lot of work to be done.

Notes

- 1) The Fondation Travail-Université (FTU) is an independent para-academic research institution located at the University of Namur. FTU was established in 1967 in order to build a bridge between academic research and social organisations in the French speaking part of Belgium.
- 2) Belgium is a Federal State composed of three Regions (Flanders, Walloon region and Brussels). The Walloon region is the French speaking part and Flanders the Dutch speaking part. Since 1990, research and technology are mostly regional matters (about 2/3 of public R&D expenditure is managed by the Regions, 1/3 at the federal level). EMERIT was built in the Walloon Region.
- 3) *Valenduc, G.; Vendramin, P.; Warrant, F.: La société à l’épreuve de la technologie – Dix ans de sensibilisation aux enjeux de la recherche et du changement technologique. Collection EMERIT, FTU Namur, 2002.*

Contact

Patricia Vendramin
 Gérard Valenduc
 Centre de recherche Travail & Technologies
 Fondation Travail-Université (FTU)
 Rue de l’arsenal, 5, B-5000 Namur, Belgium
 Tel.: +32 - 81 - 72 51 22
 Fax: +32 - 81 - 72 51 28
 E-Mail: pvendramin@compuserve.com
 E-Mail: gvalenduc@compuserve.com
 Internet: <http://www.ftu-namur.org>

« »