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AIDS: The Twelve start taking action

A modest budget for coordinating research and helping developing countries.

The European Community's war on AIDS still amounts to no more than skirmishing. The limited funds available have been used to begin the task of coordinating research in the 12 EC countries and helping a number of African countries. But a shortage of cash is preventing the Community from launching a prevention campaign, according to a report on the fight against AIDS in 1987, which the European Commission adopted in mid-May.

The number of cases of AIDS notified in the Community more than doubled last year. It rose from 4,101 at the end of 1986 to 9,328 at the end of last year, an increase of 126%. But attempts to coordinate the efforts of the Twelve are making slower headway than the virus. Only some of the proposals which the Commission submitted at the beginning of 1987 have resulted in concrete action.

The Community first listed AIDS as one of the areas of research being conducted at national level which it will coordinate, when launching the fourth programme for the coordination of research in medicine and health, covering the period 1987-1991. Of the ECU 65 mn.* allocated for this programme by the Council of Ministers, ECU 14 mn. have been set aside for the fight against AIDS.

This sum was not released until last November, however. It was only thanks to the European Parliament, which exceptionally voted the sum of ECU 500,000, that the Community was able to begin the task of coordinating national research programmes, which have been either announced or are underway, thus avoiding unnecessary duplication.

Last year, the EC selected AIDS research projects in the developing countries; they will be started this year with ECU 1.5 mn. of Community money. The EC has already funded activities to combat AIDS in a number of African countries**, under a programme intended for the 66 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries that are signatories to the Lomé Convention. Most of these countries are located in those parts of the globe which have been the hardest hit by AIDS. Fifty-two of them have accepted the Community's offer of assistance.

The EC devoted ECU 900,000 last year to emergency aid and the activities of voluntary agencies in the field. This year ECU 3.5 mn. has been earmarked for five African countries***, and additional aid will be forthcoming.

The European Commission considers preventive measures essential; but its view is not shared by the Member States. It suggested last year, when submitting its proposals to them, that they share their experiences as regards their publicity campaigns and examine together all projected national measures against AIDS likely to affect immigration, the free

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movement of persons, the freedom to take up residence in a Member State and equality of employment. The fact is that these are the areas in which attitudes, especially those of regional and local authorities, can differ very widely.

Shortage of funds prevented any real coordination last year as regards preventive action. Specialists in Government departments have agreed to little more than the kind of information they will exchange periodically. The European Commission, for its part, plans to set up a system of the rapid exchange of information on all kinds of preventive measures, both official and private, which Member States have either adopted or envisage adopting.

*1 ECU = UK£ 0.66 or IR£ 0.78

** Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda

*** Rwanda, Senegal, Uganda, Zaire and Zimbabwe.

EMPLOYMENT: The European Commission wants greater equity for women

It wants the burden of proof to be shifted from them.

A woman who is paid less than her male colleagues for equal work, or one whose job application is rejected because of her sex, can take her case to court. But it is up to her to prove that she is the victim of discrimination based on sex, a far from easy task.

To put an end to a situation which penalizes the victim, the European Commission has just proposed to the Twelve that whoever is accused of practising such discrimination - an employer, more often than not - should have to give proof of the contrary.

The principle of equality of treatment for men and women is enshrined in the Treaty of Rome, the Community's "constitution", and has been embodied in the national legislation of the member states. The European Commission is now proposing a Community directive whose adoption would require the Twelve to impose new rules of evidence in this area on their courts.

A woman would still have to show that she was the victim of sex discrimination. But the person or institution whom she accused would have to prove that the principle of equality of treatment had not been violated.

The directive would also provide the national courts evidence of "indirect" discrimination, which they would need to take into account, such as a minimum height of 5 feet 7 inches for job applicants. Finally, the Commission proposal contains provisions aimed at enabling the courts to obtain all the necessary information.

MONEY: The ECU takes off

Two international air organizations decide to use the ECU.

The ECU, the European Community's currency unit, is taking off, after being honourably earthbound for over 10 years. Both IATA*, the organization which groups most of the world's airlines, and EUROCONTROL, which looks after air traffic safety over Western Europe, have turned to the ECU.

IATA will use it in compensation operations between airlines of different countries, in addition to the U.S. dollar and pound sterling. The sum involved last year was \$14.4 billion. So far 24 European and African airlines have shown an interest in the use of the ECU as a unit of account.

EUROCONTROL will invoice overflying rights in ECUs, rather than dollars, from January 1989. In 1987, it received \$1.25 billion in fees.

Transactions in ECU already involve very large sums. The banks held nearly ECU 150 billion at the end of last year, for their own account and on deposit and in the course of interbank operations. Meanwhile, bond issues in ECU totalled 30 billion. If these various sums were added up they would amount to four times the EC budget for 1988.

* International Air Transport Association.

COST OF LIVING: It remains 2 1/2 times higher in Denmark than in Portugal

The cost of a standard basket of goods and services in different EC countries.

Denmark remains the most expensive of the EC countries. A standard basket of goods and services, which costs 100 Danish crowns in Hamlet's homeland, costs no more than 40 crowns in Portugal, which remains the cheapest of the 12 EC countries.

Prices still vary a good deal from one Community country to another, as is clear from these figures, calculated on the basis of prices in March 1988 by the EC's statistical office, Eurostat.

In Germany the standard basket of goods and services would cost the housewife the equivalent of 83 crowns, in France nearly 77 and between 70 and 74 in Belgium, the Netherlands and Ireland. In Italy and Luxembourg she would have to pay around 67 crowns, 64 in the U.K., 54 in Spain and 50 in Greece. American housewives would have to pay nearly 59 crowns, as against the 93 their Japanese counterparts would be asked.

TRANSPORT: Lorry drivers' cabs threatened with shrinkage

The European Commission wants to guarantee drivers a minimum amount of space.

Lorry drivers already work under difficult conditions. But life could become much harder for them because of a tendency to reduce the size of drivers' cabs on heavy vehicles, to the point where both the safety and comfort of drivers could be threatened.

Hence the European Commission's proposal to the Twelve to modify the Community regulation regarding vehicle size, as it is this regulation which is indirectly responsible for the problem.

Existing Community legislation specifies a maximum length of 15.5 metres for articulated vehicles, but without specifying the length of the semi-trailer itself. As a result, there has been a tendency in parts of the EC to extend the length of the trailer at the expense of the driver's cabin. This sometimes involves placing the sleeping area of the second driver under the cab roof, a practice which threatens both the safety and comfort of drivers, in the Commission's view.

It has therefore proposed that from 1 July 1989 the maximum authorized length be extended to 16.5 metres, with the length of the trailer itself limited to 12 metres.

TRANSPORT: A glutton for oil

EC experts look for ways of economizing energy in the transport sector.

The transport sector in the European Community burns up oil at such a rate that it is preventing the Community from saving energy to the extent it would like to. But can anything be done about it? Community experts looked at the problem from every angle in Luxembourg for three days in mid-May, in order to draft the proposals on land transport which the European Commission wants to submit to the Member States.

There are no easy solutions, however, as the European Energy Commissioner made clear. Petroleum products meet 98% of the energy needs of the transport sector; they now account for more than half the Community's oil consumption, as against only a third in 1973, and 28% of the total energy consumption, as compared to 20% in 1973.

The transport sector in fact is the only one to have increased its energy consumption since 1973. It will be difficult to reverse this trend, however, because the techniques for reducing pollution or the danger of accidents often lead to higher oil consumption.

EDUCATION: Plenty of "takers" for the 1988-89 edition of ERASMUS

The European Programme of inter-university exchanges is proving a winner.

Applications for the 1988-89 academic year are pouring in to ERASMUS, the European Community's programme of inter-university exchanges between students, teachers and administrators. Although this is only its second year of activity, applications for the next academic year are already 2 1/2 to 3 times more numerous than a year ago, depending on the nature of the activity in question. According to the European Commission, applications for grants for the coming academic year already total ECU 100mn.*, while the sum available from the Community's budget is limited to ECU 30mn.

More than 2,000 applications have been received for inter-university cooperation programmes covering institutes of higher education in the different EC countries. This is nearly 2 1/2 times as many as in 1987. The increase in applications from universities in Italy, Spain and Portugal has been even greater.

Higher education institutions have asked for Community support for student exchanges involving 19,000 persons. In order to satisfy all the demands, the EC would need to spend nearly three times the sum it has budgeted for this purpose. Many of the applicants are interested in the other activities funded by ERASMUS, notably teacher exchanges and study visits.

The selection committees face a particularly difficult task. The results will no doubt be announced in June.

TRANSPORT: A common market for rail transport?

The Twelve confirm that 1992 remains the deadline.

The creation of a frontier-free Europe, set for 1992, applies to the transport sector also. This was confirmed by the European Community's transport ministers when they met at Hof, in Bavaria, at the end of April. They also asked the European Commission to list the obstacles to the creation of a common market for rail transport - and to put forward solutions to them.

The ministers envisaged the elimination of halts at the Community's internal frontiers. European travellers know that not all frontier railway stations are as important as those at Aix-la-Chapelle or Antwerp and that European express trains could do away with certain halts.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.66 or IR£0.78

RESEARCH: It's not enough to design the perfect mousetrap

The European Commission wants ECU 38mn.* to publicize R&D results.

The European Commission is asking the twelve Member States for ECU 38mn., in order to ensure that the results of Community-financed research and development are given wider publicity - and are more quickly translated, as a result, into marketable products.

The Commission has sent the twelve European Community countries a "specific programme for diffusion and utilization of the results of technological research and development". It covers the 4-year period ending June 1992.

The programme seeks to remedy what has often been regarded as a major European weakness: the fact that scientific discoveries, even remarkable ones, do not always lead quickly to saleable products.

Under the Commission's programme the results of Community R&D would be diffused by both traditional and modern means. The EC would support financially the creation of a modern communications network to enable specialists to work together, regardless of where they are located in the Community.

The programme would also allow the European Commission to continue its technical and financial support for the association which groups European researcher networks (RARE) and the EUREKA "Cosine" project, which seeks to promote communication standards between the computerized information systems of the various European countries.

RESEARCH: Machine translation makes headway

But more money is needed if it is to continue to do so.

The European Community is coming a little closer to realizing the old dream of automatic translation. The research programme, EUROTRA, adopted by the Community in 1982, is nearing the end of its second stage. The European Commission is therefore asking the Twelve to put up some ECU 12mn.* for the third stage, which should see the completion of the first prototype in two years' time. The system would handle the Community's nine official languages** but would be limited to one area and to certain types of text.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.66 or IR£0.78

** Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish.

INTERNAL MARKET: Helping people living in border areas adjust to 1992

The European Commission describes the possibilities the Community offers them.

People living along the European Community's internal frontiers must not be the victims of the single internal market. The European Commission has pointed out that Community assistance is available to them, and that the reforms to the European social and regional funds, currently under way, should provide them additional help.

People living in the border areas generally depend for their livelihood on customs and other activities normal to such areas. But with the disappearance of the Community's internal frontiers, at the end of 1992 in principle, jobs will disappear - as many as 1,000 in the Savoyard district of Modane, in France, according to the French Euro-MP, Jean-Pierre Cot.

Replying to a question from Mr. Cot, the European Commission noted that it was already in touch with those whose jobs were at risk, in order to see just how the Community's social and regional funds could help them find new ones before 1992.

The Commission reminded Mr. Cot that the Member States can already jointly plan the investments to be made in their transborder regions and ask the Community to back them financially.

Once the EC Council of Ministers will have adopted the regulations implementing the projected reform of the Community's regional funds - during 1988 in principle - the Commission will be able to finance studies or pilot projects in border areas. The Commission in fact has already proposed that regional and local authorities be associated in the preparation and implementation of activities backed by the social and regional funds.

During their meeting in Brussels this February, the Community's heads of state or government agreed on the principle of reforming the Community's regional, social and agricultural funds. These reforms involve the doubling of their financial resources between now and 1993 and grant priority to certain of their activities.

This reform implements the much wider reform of the "European constitution", the Treaty of Rome, begun last July. The Commission must now adopt the new regulations governing the operation of these Community funds.

ENERGY: Consumption rises only slightly in the 12-nation EC

Up 0.9% while GDP rises by 2.3%.

The European Community used energy more efficiently last year. Total energy consumption rose by 0.9% in 1987, while industrial production grew by 2% and Gross Domestic Product by 2.3%, according to Eurostat, the Community's statistical office.

In other words, the EC needed 1.6% less energy last year than in 1986 to raise GDP by a given amount. This was a positive outcome, at a time when the relatively low price of oil encourages consumption. But it is inadequate, if the Community wishes to come nearer the goal it has set itself for 1995: to use 20% less energy than in 1986 to produce an equal amount of wealth.

Another worrying point is the fall in Community energy production, even while consumption has risen. The EC inevitably had to import more - 1.2% more than in 1986, thus becoming slightly more dependent on its external suppliers. Net imports* amounted to 44.9% of Community consumption last year, as against 44.7% in 1986 and 43.2% in 1985.

In 1987, the 12-nation Community used less coal and oil; even so, oil still accounted for 44.9% of its total energy consumption, although it supplies less than a quarter of Community energy production. Consumption of nuclear energy went up by 2.7%; that is, more slowly than in previous years. The complete disappearance of nuclear energy from the Italian scene and the sharp fall in U.K. production reduced the impact, at the Community level, of the substantial increases recorded in Spain and Germany. Nuclear energy met 12.9% of the EC's total energy requirements last year.

Community energy production fell slightly in 1987; coal and oil recorded falls of 2.7% and 3.7% respectively. Natural gas production rose by 3.1%, however, while output of nuclear energy and primary electrical energy - mainly from hydroelectric power stations - increased by some 3%.

Imports of coal and crude oil declined, although oil still accounted for two-thirds of the net energy imports into the Community. Imports of natural gas increased by 12.4% and of petroleum products by 61.3%, after falling sharply in 1986.

* Imports minus exports.