

Save Us, Science!

Charles Parker

In response to the global economic downturn, many governments have announced large stimulus packages to “kick-start” trade and the world economy. At the recent G20 summit, world leaders pledged \$1.1 trillion to tackle the recession. However, most of this loan is earmarked for trade or the International Monetary Fund and none was directed towards scientific research or even green technologies. The only mention of sustainable investment was at the end of the official G20 statement, where leaders agreed to discuss the topic at a later conference [1]. Have politicians ignored investment in science and technology as a method of rejuvenating the economy? Let’s take the UK as an example of the effects of the downturn.

One area seriously hit by the recession is medical research. Charities such as the Wellcome Trust and Cancer Research UK report a drop in donations and huge losses on their investments. The Wellcome Trust alone has lost over £2 billion in the course of 2008 [3]. Inevitably this will lead to reduced funding; the Leukaemia Foundation is cutting its annual grant budget by 25% for 2009 [3]. This shortfall is not countered by any stimulus package announced so far. In my opinion, this is a mistake. Better treatments for chronic diseases will improve workers’ health and increase productivity. The government shouldn’t expect too bad a return either. Global pharmaceutical sales are predicted to

hit \$1.2 trillion by 2012 [4]; hence investment in medical research could increase trade. Furthermore, healthcare spending is set to rise by 4.3% per capita this year [4], reflecting rising costs and eating further into government expenditure. Investing in research into chronic diseases (which by their duration place a burden on the NHS) could help to limit future costs.

In addition to funding medical research, environmentally-friendly technology has been championed by politicians as a way out of the recession. Gordon Brown recently trumpeted the “Green New Deal”, which places investment in the green sector at the forefront of economic recovery, with a projected 400,000 new jobs and a public works program echoing Roosevelt in the 1920s [2]. However, this hasn’t translated into much actual investment. An HSBC report [5] shows that only 6.9% of the UK’s financial recovery plan is directed towards green investment, and Greenpeace puts “new” green spending at just 0.6% [6]. A breakdown shows that this funding was not for renewable energy or even carbon-capture, but mostly directed towards improving energy efficiency (e.g. home insulation). Although increasing efficiency is laudable, it does not go far enough.

Failure to invest in alternative energy is a missed opportunity and has resulted in a loss of private sector funding for initiatives such as wind farms [7]. Alternative energy contributes much of the revenue in the green sector, as highlighted in recent reports by HSBC [5] and Lord Stern [8], and has good job-creation potential. In contrast the current stimulus package focuses on low-return areas such as rail. Green power sources would lead to greater energy independence, reducing reliance on imported oil. This would have the added benefits of helping balance trade deficits, and could even lead to a net energy export from the UK, similar to France’s current nuclear energy surplus [9].

A real “Green New Deal” could solve the energy crisis as well as the economic one. The UK could take a leaf out of President Obama’s book: his administration has earmarked \$120 billion for science [10]. As Al Gore says, the “old alleged conflict between the economy and the environment is mostly a myth” [11]. ■

Charles Parker is a second year at Gonville and Caius College studying Medicine. He is currently Events Co-Director of The Triple Helix, Cambridge.



© stock.schn

References:

- [1] Global plan for recovery and reform, G20 [document on the Internet; cited 2009 Apr]. Available at: <http://www.londonsummit.gov.uk/resources/en/news/15766232/communique-020409>
- [2] Brown calls for ‘green new deal’, BBC News [document on the Internet; cited 2009 Apr] Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7927381.stm
- [3] Slump forces medical charities to cut back life-saving research, The Independent Available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/slump-forces-medical-charities-to-cut-back-lifesaving-research-1651719.html>
- [4] The World in 2009, The Economist, The World in Figures: Industries
- [5] A Climate for Recovery, HSBC Global Research [document on the Internet; 2009 Feb 25] Available at: http://globaldashboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/HSBC_Green_New_Deal.pdf

- [6] ‘Green Stimulus or Stimulus?’, New Economics Foundation [document on the Internet; 2009 Mar] Available at: <http://www.neweconomics.org/gen/uploads/lte3x45buqkii55cs3wpan502042009155005.pdf>
- [7] Shell pulls out of big wind farm, BBC News, 2008 May 1, Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7377164.stm>
- [8] Towards a Global Green Recovery, Edenhoffer & Stern [document on the Internet; cited 2009 Apr] Available at: <http://www.pik-potsdam.de/globalgreenrecovery>
- [9] Nuclear Power in France, World Nuclear Association, cited 2009 Apr, Available at: <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/inf40.html>
- [10] Obama’s Bonus for Science and Technology, New Scientist, data available at <http://www.newscientist.com/data/images/archive/2698/26984001.jpg>
- [11] Gore says economic, climate crises share solutions, Mercury News, 2009 Apr 3, Available at: http://www.mercurynews.com/breakingnews/ci_12064722