Conference on pan-European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (pEPTA)

7 September 2011, European Parliament, Brussels

***António Correia de Campos*, MEP,**
Vice-President of STOA

Europeans are presently spectators to a World undergoing a strong and irreversible transformation process, which is driving us to a yet unclear outcome. The drivers of change, such as

1) demographics,
2) the rise of emergent countries heavily concentrated in manufacturing industries, and
3) the need for a environmentally sustainable development model,

are altogether creating a heavy geopolitical transformation. Policy-making needs to respond rapidly and deliver effectively on the challenges ahead. What can science contribute?

Knowledge is playing an increasingly important role as the systemic enhancer of societal development. Scientific research never advanced so fast and as a consequence, knowledge is being generated at an unprecedented pace. A month in the beginning of this 21st century outputs more tested knowledge than one year in the early 20th century. The temporal gap between main scientific advances and their translation into our daily lives is shortening as never before.

What are the results of such a powerful information flow?

1. Firstly, **change**: knowledge has quickly changed the way we live, communicate, and relate to each other. We find hard to conceive a different reality from the one we enjoy today: one without the freedom offered by our mobility and communication patterns; without the safety of easily accessing a doctor or a medication to

treat our illness or relieve our pain; or simply without the thermal and living comfort in our homes.

2. Secondly, **uncertainty** is also on the rise. Technological advancement has brought a smaller World and a globalised economy. And despite all the benefits, a number of other potential costs for Europe raise important concerns for citizens, such as higher unemployment, the threat to the European Social Model and the potential loss of wealth.

The Political Challenge

How can political leaders and parliamentarians best respond to the challenges ahead? How can potential risks be mitigated and how can we make the most out of future opportunities?

Failure to provide the best political response comes at a too high social cost; The gaps in understanding and regulation between science and society are no longer tolerable. Modern society has understood the value of knowledge and engaged in a race across geographies to lead scientific and technological advancement.

In its Europe 2020 strategy document, the European Commision outlines its vision for the future. Science & Innovation are at the core of this strategy. Many of the flagship initiatives and instruments that cascade down are intended to support and enable both scientific progress and technological innovation. They are designed to bring about sustainable and smart growth for Europe by breeding an optimal ecosystem for the promotion of science, education and innovation. European policies aim at fostering excellence and the impacts arising from research. An effort is being placed on the coordination of strategic research agendas among MS, involving industry

and providing the right framework conditions to facilitate innovation. Parliaments have here an important responsibility.

The Role for Future-Oriented Technology Assessment (FTA)

In the present context of complexity, uncertainty, and accelerated social and technological change, forward looking activities must play a role in underpinning policy responses. By anticipating outlooks for the future, Parliaments are in better position to prepare it and influence it towards preferred outcomes. Through scientific methodology, Future-Oriented Technology Assessment can obtain the evidence-base necessary to assess alternative scenarios and options for political course of action. The role of FTA is more important today, in informing and advising policy formulation, when Europe needs to tackle the decisive challenges that it faces.

Despite such potential, recent events (economic downturn and the nature caused technological disasters) may suggest an insufficient integration of forward-looking approaches in decision-making processes. Still, there are inherent difficulties in addressing the interface between FTA and the political sphere, which are important to mention:

a. To some extent, there is a decentralized nature in European decision-making processes. This entails many stakeholders. They may stand either for complementary or for opposing priorities as regards the available options for political action. Opening the political process inside Parliaments is a means of making it more robust and more responsive to societal needs.

b. However, evidence provided by TA shall be seen as only one element for decision support. Emphasis on short-term measures often cause a more direct impact on peoples' lives and offer a best match with political cycles. Easing this tendency may be achieved if TA results make more evident a link between the long-term perspective and those aspects of actionable relevance in the current political agenda.

c. Another point of concern, is the inherent limitations and degree of uncertainty linked to anticipative technology assessment. Not only there is an enormous degree of complexity associated to the EU Grand Challenges, but also their changing nature and the occurrence of unanticipated events makes it impossible to fully account today, for the future. The risk is therefore to oversell promising potential or to overstate catastrophic societal developments. Past examples (Club of Rome, 1970s), where exaggeration of claims helped to build attention, are mistakes that entail long lasting reputation costs in an area where trust is an essential requirement.

d. Finally, raising awareness among policy makers, and striving for impact should be a central concern for Parliamentary Technology Assessment. Raising impact requires a mutual engagement from both producers and receptors of Parliamentary TA studies. Endorsement of PTA from political leadership is certainly central to bringing its results to the political agenda. On the other hand, the issue of raising political relevance must be present at every stage of PTA project development: using a more customer-centered approach, putting more emphasis on more actionable results and options for action, and

by laboriously strengthening communication channels with the studies' clients.

Coming to the end, PTA has been supporting decision-makers prepare better informed, coherent and effective policies that will enable our capacity to tackle the Grand Challenges ahead. In doing so, it enables decision-makers to shape the future by acting today. I feel confident that in the years to come we will be spectators to the fine-tuning and the success of Parliamentary TA in this important role.

I thank you for your attention.