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'Bioeconomy' still a mysterious object to Society stakeholders

When communicating the bioeconomy, “We can’t leave the public behind,” says Patrick Wall, Professor of Public Health, at University College Dublin, on the first day of the Bioeconomy in the EU conference held in the Irish capital city on February 14th and 15th 2013. “With social media and networking shaping the public’s perception - he stressed- this is an urgent necessity”.

According to the Dublin conference speakers, the bioeconomy, which involves exploiting commercially the outcome of research connected to life science research, is the basis of a sustainable and economically viable future for Europe and the rest of the world. Yet, it is a mysterious topic not only to lay persons, but also to science and industry stakeholders. A survey conducted by the CommNet project (www.commnet.eu), in anticipation of the EU Conference, suggests that the term ‘bioeconomy’ itself is not well understood, This means that it could trigger potential opposition, at worst, and indifference, at best, to effective implementation of its applications at local, regional, national and indeed global levels.

This finding echoes the CommNet experience in training workshops, with scientists and communicators from bioeconomy research projects. Often , participants admit being unfamiliar with the term, lacking confidence in communicating about their research and being unable to demonstrate how it fits in a way that is relevant and accessible to wider society.

An overwhelming 90% of respondents believe that society’s understanding of the bioeconomy must improve, But their own choice among several definitions proposed in the CommNet survey demonstrates that even this more expert group does not agree on a definition. 42% selected ‘Using bio-processes for new products, healthy and sustainable solutions’, 38% chose ‘The exploitation of biology and biochemistry for industrial and economic use’ , 14.5% stated it was another word for agribusiness, biotechnology or organic products, and 5.5% said they did not know or could not select any of the suggested terms.

Reaching a consensus on a definition of and vision for the bioeconomy could help all the stakeholders speak the same language. Meanwhile, it would also potentially help drive understanding of its relevance to daily life and progress in science.

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CommFABnet is an FP7 funded support action project making Bioeconomy research relevant and accessible to adults & children, politicians & industry, media & teachers. It provides network membership, training, audio visual and education materials and industry and policy for a www.commnet.eu