

A Brazilian innovation

From Agropolis International thematic directory n° 10 - "A model laboratory without walls: the Brazilian Labex" (March 2010 - 26 p.)

The idea was born in Brazil. At its inception, Eliseu Alves and Francisco Reifschneider gave the following explanation: *'We want our researchers, and not just our students, to "rub shoulders" with the best teams of the great scientific powers. In programmes that are at the cutting-edge, each in its specific field, as regards new technologies and innovation. We have chosen a formula of the "laboratory without walls" or "external laboratory (Labex)" type in which our researchers choose the team that they wish to join, the one that works best on the subject that is most relevant to the requirements of the theme that they address in Brazil. They do not work on "their own" research subject but on the research subject of the host team, like any other scientist in the team. They must make themselves accepted, recognised as researchers of international quality and establish all the links required to develop a network of new collaboration between European and Brazilian laboratories'*. Labex Europe has now been running for seven years. It has reached the age of reason. The moment to draw lessons from a magnificent experience and to share them.

International partnerships for both higher education and research can be in various forms. Many students in Southern countries perform their

doctoral studies in universities in the North. Unfortunately, they too often work on research subjects that are only relevant for the host country. In addition, the intensity of doctoral work leaves them little time to explore opportunities and/or learn things outside their research subjects. Senior researchers do not often leave their laboratories, except to attend international congresses; those who do travel are mainly consultants from the North on missions to the South of varying duration, or are seconded for several years, as is common for French researchers at CIRAD (*Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement*) and IRD (*Institut de recherche pour le développement*).

Is the Labex a true model that can be reused for other partnerships here and elsewhere?

At the end of the 1990s, *Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária* (Embrapa)

decided to explore a new partnership model, the 'laboratory without walls', whose main designers were Francisco Reifschneider and Eliseu Alves, the first Director-President of Embrapa. The new concept consists of sending senior scientists to high-level laboratories in the North for a period of 2 to 4 years. Their mission is twofold: first, to complete and strengthen their experience by joining a high-level team and working on one of its cutting-edge projects, and, second, to devote as much time as allowed by a half-time post to exploratory activities (scientific watch,

visits, participation in conferences, etc.) completed by communication/information activities addressed to their Brazilian colleagues.

The first Labex was set up in 1998 in the United States, hosted by and collaborating with a single organisation, USDA-ARS*. A second one was started four years later in Europe. CIRAD, INRA (*Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique*) and IRD gave a mandate to Agropolis International for the signing of an agreement between Embrapa and the regional multi-institutional consortium—24 research and higher education establishments—housed at Agropolis International in Montpellier, France.

This Agropolis International Dossier on partnership describes Labex Europe, a successful experience in scientific cooperation. It explains the choice of themes made by Embrapa management—genomics, natural resources, agrifood technologies—and highlights the main results achieved. It analyses the lessons learned and future prospects with reference to both the Brazilian institution and its French partners. Is the Labex a true model that can be reused for other partnerships here and elsewhere?

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* United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service

A few dates of Labex Europe



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2 October 2002

Official inauguration of Labex Europe attended by the President-Director, Dr Alberto Duque Portugal, and the Brazilian Minister of Agriculture, Dr Pratinô de Moraes, at Agropolis International, Montpellier



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April - May 2002

Beginning of the work of the scientists Ana Brasileiro, Regina Lago and José Madeira in the Montpellier laboratories



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21 January 2002

Launching of the activities of the Labex Europe office with the arrival in Montpellier of Elisio Contini, the first coordinator

October 2001

Locating of Labex Europe at Agropolis International, Montpellier, by decision of the executive management of Embrapa

April 2001

An Embrapa delegation visited various European centres including that in Montpellier, France

January 2001

The executive management of Embrapa decided to set up an external laboratory without walls (Labex) in Europe



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2 November 2005

Beginning of the work of the scientist Heloisa Filgueiras in Avignon, France

January 2005

The second coordinator, Luis F.Vieira, took up his post



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20 May 2006

Installation of Labex Europe at the University of Wageningen, Netherlands, with the scientist Manoel Souza



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1 February 2009

The third coordinator, Pedro B. Arcuri, took up his post

September 2008

Creation of the International Advanced Biology Consortium (CIBA)

July 2008

Decision to work with Rothamsted Research Institute in the UK

18 - 24 May 2008

Visit to the United Kingdom by an Embrapa delegation to identify a host institution for a Labex researcher

2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009



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A message from Elisio Contini

the first coordinator of Labex Europe

Labex Europe institutionalises long-term scientific and technical cooperation between Embrapa, the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation, and Agropolis International in Montpellier, with the participation of several European centres of excellence in agriculture in France, the Netherlands and England.

The presence of Brazilian researchers in European research centres shows Brazil's interest and its dynamism in terms of partnerships in joint research projects and monitoring new scientific discoveries in this continent.

Scientific links remain when the scientists return to Brazil after their stays in European centres, and new projects or programmes are implemented, as is the case of the International Advanced Biology Consortium (*Consortium International en Biologie Avancée*, CIBA) in genetics and genomics (page 12).

Labex Europe also stands out for its creativeness and the construction of new partnership models; it is evaluated with regard to the results achieved. Without going over and above the laws of the participating countries, it is free of the long bureaucratic procedures required for the approval of projects and of the administrative procedures that are generally essential for awarding permission to civil servants to leave their country.

It has contributed to strengthening the quality of the research conducted by Embrapa by allowing its researchers to work in centres of scientific and technological excellence. In return, European researchers have benefited from confrontation with new research problematics and the issues associated with a country at the developing stage as regards technology and science. They have been involved in the search for new products and responses to problems in tropical agriculture. They have made progress in the knowledge required to help other developing countries, in Africa for example.

The implementation at world level of knowledge that can help agriculture to increase its contribution to reducing poverty in the world has a significant humanitarian impact. It can help people to live in their own countries and thus reduce traumatising, illegal migration.

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