

## **Promoting OR in Europe**

### **A personal account of the “EURO Session” in Brussels**

Following the initiative of AIRO to open a debate on the respective roles of EURO and the National OR Societies, a “EURO session” was organised in Brussels with the aim of openly discussing the many issues raised in the series of editorials published in AIRO-News.

This session was widely announced in the Programme of EURO XVI was open to everyone although Presidents and Representatives of the National OR Societies were specially welcomed. It gathered around 35 persons (most of them being either Presidents or EURO representatives of their National Societies). The discussion was open and lively. Rather than trying to produce rather dry “minutes” of this session, I shall try to give here a personal account of the main issues that were raised. This account is in no way “official” and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Executive Committee of EURO.

#### **Is there a need for National OR Societies in Europe ?**

For years it seemed more or less obvious that scientific societies should be organised on a national basis. This idea has shaped the present organisation of OR in Europe. Indeed IFORS and EURO have always made many efforts to encourage the creation of OR Societies in newly created countries or in countries without one.

Marc Pirlot observed that such an organisation may now be questionable. Some National OR Societies are in a difficult situation. People involved in them spend much energy trying to keep them alive and the return on investment seems to be low. Taking the example of the Belgian OR Society, he observed that it was more and more difficult to involve young operational researchers in the activities of National Societies, that national journals consume much money and energy without reaching a large audience, that most researchers are more attracted to large international conferences than to national conferences and that information bulletins are not read. This situation clearly questions the necessity of the existence of the National OR Societies. Travelling within Europe is getting cheaper every day; communication has never been so easy. Why not envisage a different organisation of our scientific associations ?

Although the difficult situation of some National OR Societies is a fact, most of the participants to the “EURO session” agreed that the present organisation of our Societies will not and should not be drastically altered in the near future. There presently seems to be a real need for National OR Societies. Among the many arguments that were put forward the following seem to be the most important ones:

- In the present organisation of Europe, “nations” still play a very important role. National OR Societies are instrumental in promoting OR given the importance of public research

funds allocated on a national basis, the many particularities of the academic systems throughout Europe and the importance of “nations” in the present organisation of the European Union (EU) and the allocation of its research funds.

- There is much variance in the present situation of National OR Societies; some of them do not experience the difficulties mentioned by Marc Pirlot and might not be in favour of a complete reorganisation.
- EURO is presently an association of associations and has no individual members. This situation is not likely to change in the near future given the present organisation of OR at an international level (IFORS) and the variety of the situation of the various members of EURO. It is not clear whether such an evolution is indeed desirable.
- National OR Societies can organise events which are close to their members and at which they can speak their own language. Young operational researchers need such events before going (and having the funds to go) to larger international conferences.
- Being active on a local level seems to be the most useful way to involve people from industry in scientific associations.

I fully share the view that National OR Societies should not disappear and I do hope that IFORS and EURO will continue to promote the creation of new ones (Russia may be the next one on the list). However, if a national organisation of OR in Europe is to be maintained, something should be done to revitalise National OR Societies experiencing the problems described by Marc Pirlot. This is all the more true that INFORMS and the most active European OR Societies might well get some National OR Societies “out of the market”.

### **Offering “good value for money”**

Many useful suggestions in order for National OR Societies to offer “good value for money” to their members were put forward in the series of editorials of AIRO-News and during the “EURO session”. The importance of “imitation” of successful initiatives of other Societies and the necessary quest for synergies cannot be overemphasised. I recall below some of the suggestions that were made.

- Scientific meetings should not be restricted to national conferences. Specialised workshops, tutorials, working groups, “information days” on various topics in OR are useful ways to promote OR and to keep contact with members.
- National Societies should cooperate in the edition of their newsletters in order to make them richer and more attractive. The joint publication of a journal may also solve the problem of the time and energy consumed in the maintaining of small publications having little audience.
- Attracting young operational researchers is vital for National OR Societies. Organising PhD prizes, publicising abstracts of PhD dissertations, setting up placement services, promoting OR in high schools, giving incentives of various kinds might be good ways to do so.

- An intensive use of new information technologies (e-mail, WWW, video-conferencing, etc.) can be very helpful in allowing to reduce the fixed costs of running a National Society. Furthermore a good use of these new technologies may highly contribute to the promotion of OR.
- National Societies cannot live while gathering only academics. Efforts should be made to attract people in industry: seminars, tutorials, placement services. National Societies should strive to become indispensable “go-betweens” in the projects oriented towards the EU.
- National Societies should exchange ideas, technologies (the idea of a common structure of Web pages was suggested) and information. They should have common projects, *e.g.* the organisation of international problem-solving contests.

EURO may and should help the National Societies in all these respects. The EURO WWW pages should continue to develop so as to become the inevitable entry point for finding information on OR in Europe. They should offer an easy access to the pages of the National OR Societies and contribute to the diffusion of information on their activities (*e.g.* including the programmes of national conferences and workshops, publicising the table of contents of national OR journals). Creating a “EURO electronic discussion list” could well improve the “networking” role of EURO. The preparation of a directory of operational researchers in Europe should soon follow the development of the directory of OR/MS courses and of OR research units. Similarly, the EURO Bulletin should develop with the objective of becoming a “must read” for anyone interested in OR in Europe: hopefully operational researchers in Europe will soon come to read it before *OR/MS Today*. National OR Societies and their members should be heavily involved in these developments; a “network” is useless if it not regularly fed !

### **What about EURO ?**

Without doubt the existence of EURO interferes with the activities of National OR Societies. It could thus be tempting to blame EURO for the poor situation of some of its members. Hopefully it seems that the existence of EURO in its present form was favourably considered by all participants to the “EURO Session”. Before discussing the role of EURO, it might be worth recalling its main characteristics.

- EURO is an “association of associations” and has no individual members. EURO communicates with its members through the EURO representatives of each of its members. Their task is vital to EURO. If they do not keep EURO informed of the activities of their Societies and do not inform the members of their Societies of the activities of EURO, there is a risk for EURO of being considered as a remote bureaucratic organisation which have few links with the “members of its members”.
- In most of the instruments of EURO, the National OR Societies are heavily involved: they organise EURO-k Conferences, they nominate candidates for the EURO Gold Medal,

they select candidates for the EURO Summer and Winter Institutes, they govern EURO through their votes at the EURO Council.

- The main source of revenue of EURO is linked to its agreement with Elsevier, the publisher of EJOR. More than 80% of the resources of EURO come from this agreement. If EJOR were to disappear or if the agreement would cease, the resources of EURO would decrease to a point that would threaten the existence of many of its instruments. EURO has thus a vital interest in maintaining the present status of EJOR: it always promotes EJOR as the normal publication media of its activities (Mini-EURO Conferences, EURO Summer and Winter Institutes, EURO Working Groups) and encourages its members not to take actions that could be detrimental to EJOR. EJOR is now one of the top-ranked journals in OR and that it is very unlikely given the present state of the market that another journal could reach that level within a foreseeable future.

EURO has a vital interest in maintaining healthy and lively National OR Societies: an association cannot exist without members ! It is also crucial that National OR Societies consider EURO as THEIR association. Without their active involvement most of the EURO instruments would simply cease to exist. The idea of “subsidiarity” is central to EURO: it does not want to replace National OR Societies and its only function is to offer its members a number of instruments that can be more conveniently organised on an international level. This “win-win” relationship will hopefully continue to govern the life of OR in Europe in the future.

### **Where do we go from there ?**

EURO cannot live without its members and has no intention of competing with them. Does it offer good service to its members however ? I do think that most of the instruments of EURO are useful and their existence have greatly contributed to the promotion of OR throughout Europe. EURO-k Conferences, EURO Summer and Winter Institutes, EURO Working Groups are certainly among the most useful instruments that were set up; some other instruments EURO, most notably the EURO Prime Conferences or the Best Applied Paper Prize, were somewhat less successful and the Executive Committee of EURO is working hard to improve them. Major developments of the EURO Web pages and the EURO Bulletin are expected in the near future. EJOR is one of the rare example of a truly European journal which competes with the top-ranked international journals. Its very success has however transformed it a very large “library journal” which is not affordable to most individuals. Hopefully the advent of electronic publishing will facilitate the individual access to EJOR while keeping intact the resources of EURO.

Many things remain to be done however. At the occasion of EURO 2000 in Budapest, EURO will celebrate its 25th anniversary. This might be a good occasion to reflect on what has been achieved and to propose new directions for future developments. I list some of them below.

- Relations with the European Union

In spite of its many previous efforts, EURO has been unable to develop really fruitful contact with the EU. The word “OR” is probably still unknown to most EU officials. The importance of developing education in OR at a European level is still not recognised. The EURO Summer and Winter Institutes were never directly funded by the EU in spite of their importance for the future of our community in Europe. EURO was never asked for any advice by the EU. I strongly believe that this is the most urgent direction in which we should try to move forward. EURO has the responsibility of promoting OR at the European level and having good contacts with the EU seems indispensable to reach that goal. Needless to say that these contacts should not be detrimental to the National OR Societies representing countries that are not members of the EU.

– Relation to the National OR Societies

In 1995, at the occasion of the 20th anniversary of EURO, Costas Pappis edited a special issue of EJOR that was partly devoted to the situation of OR in Europe (Vol. 87, #3). This should certainly be continued. EURO should keep closer contact with its members and offer everyone a clear and regularly updated view of the situation of OR in Europe. Why not start in 2000 ? Conversely, as proposed by APDIO, this same year could well be the occasion for EURO to reflect on its objectives and instruments. The “EURO Session” in Brussels was certainly a first step in that direction. However we should try to collect opinions from a much wider group of operational researchers in Europe: advice and opinion from people who are little involved in their National Societies and seldom participate to the EURO Council would be welcomed.

– Promotion of OR

Most Europeans more or less know what Geometry, Biology or Chemistry are about. Unfortunately the situation seems to be different for our field ! Widely promoting OR should be a vital task for EURO. The very word of “OR” – and, possibly, its content ! – should become known by most Europeans. Much work has to be done to achieve this objective; we certainly have many things to offer Europe but it seems that very few people in firms or in governments are aware of the fact ! Developing education and training, lobbying, setting up advisory committees and widely publicised prizes, establishing strong links with scientific association in closely related fields (Computer Science, Artificial Intelligence, Economics, Applied Maths, Management) seem to be important tasks for the near future. We should make sure that within ten years the word “EURO” will mean to many people something else than just the name of currency.

– Information technologies

Promoting OR also means investing in new information technologies. Well-organised WWW pages, educational softwares, on-line directories, electronic publishing, attractive promotion material made widely available on the Web, video tapes on successful applications, information on commercial softwares, etc., appear to be good means to attract students as well as practitioners.

On the verge of retiring from the position of Secretary of EURO and leaving the Executive Committee of EURO, I have the impression that EURO offers a lot to its members but that the road ahead is still long and exciting.

Being the Secretary of an association having only 27 members may appear as a trivial task. The particular nature of EURO makes it very challenging and exciting. I recommend it. I would like to wish much success to the new Executive Committee that will manage EURO starting January 1999. It is my hope that, with the help and in agreement with the Member Societies of EURO, it will be able to work towards an even more active association.

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