

Innovation is 'imperative,' says Brazil science minister

But new appointee must reverse last year's budget cuts.

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Marco Antonio Raupp, Brazil's newly appointed minister of science, technology and innovation, wants innovation to be one of his country's highest priorities.

"Innovation is not an option, it is imperative," Raupp declared yesterday as he took up his post. "The future of our country depends on this creative effort."

Brazilian scientists have welcomed the appointment of Raupp, a physicist who has previously led the National Laboratory of Scientific Computation, the National Institute for Space Research, the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science and the Brazilian Space Agency. But they are wary of the implications of the focus on innovation.

The previous minister, Aloizio Mercadante, also made innovation a priority, but some worried that his policy was too focused on industry — particularly in the way that funds were dispersed by FINEP, a federal agency that funds innovation projects in universities, research institutes and public and private companies.

"We hope that FINEP does not become simply an investment bank for industry," says Luiz Davidovich, director of the Brazilian Academy of Science. "There is an expectation that the new minister will find a balance between pushing innovation in industry and supporting research institutions and human-resources training."

Those in Brazil's science community also hope that Raupp will take on board the recommendations of the 'Blue Book', a document outlining a national science policy that was drawn up following a nationwide consultation run by the science ministry in 2010.

The Blue Book calls for an increase in spending on science and technology, up to 2% of Brazil's gross domestic product by 2020; innovative and sustainable exploration of Brazil's territory; and the use of science and technology to reduce regional and social inequalities.

"We had little progress on the Blue Book in 2011, since budget cuts hindered the action of the [funding agency] National Council of Technological and Scientific Development and the actions in science and technology for social development," says Davidovich, who was executive secretary of the conference that developed the Blue Book.

In 2011, the Brazilian science ministry's budget was cut for the first time in almost a decade, after more than doubling between 2003 and 2010 under president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Mario Neto Borges, president of the National Council of the State Foundations for Research Support, says that restoring the science budget will be Raupp's first big challenge. "We hope that Raupp will be politically able to conduct a negotiation in order to re-establish the budget for science."

Raupp may be pushing at an open door. Brazil's Congress has approved a big increase in the science budget in 2012, from R\$6.4 billion (US\$ 3.6 billion) to R\$8.5 billion, and Borges points out that president Dilma Rousseff has said that she intends to continue her predecessor's support for science. But much will depend on Rousseff's priorities in dealing with the country's economic situation — it was worries over inflation and public spending that led her to override Congress's budget last year and bring in the cut for science, something that Lula always managed to avoid.



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Brazilian science minister Marco Antonio Raupp (left) must convince president Dilma Rousseff (right) to continue to support science and technology.

