

Welcoming speech

Karl-Heinz Narjes

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WELCOMING SPEECH

Karl-Heinz Narjes

Draft text of a speech by Vice-President Karl-Heinz Narjes, on 27 April 1987, at the opening session of the 'Seminar on Biotechnology in Europe and Latin America', Conference Centre Albert Borschette, Brussels.

Your Excellency, Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome, on behalf of the Commission, the many distinguished visitors who have kindly accepted our invitation to this international gathering. There are present, representatives of some twenty different nations; but let me emphasise not our diversity, but our common interests. The European Community and its Member States have worked together to organise this seminar, and to offer to our guests from Latin America our hospitality; our friendship; our ideas; and our hopes for continuing and mutually beneficial collaboration.

The subject on which our common interests will be focussed during this three-day seminar is *biotechnology*. Much can be said, much will be said, during these three busy days; but even if we talk all day, we shall not exhaust the range of topics covered by this broad subject. I speak with some confidence on this; the Commission has been talking about biotechnology, and developing its policies, for over ten years; some of our Member States for much longer. Whether we adopt a narrow or a broad definition, we have to recognise that ultimately the biological revolutions in progress will influence or transform every field of application of the life sciences – including agriculture and forestry, health care and pharmaceuticals, organic waste and water recycling, and the care of the environment.

Initially, we saw biotechnology mainly as a research matter. Our first programme, the biomolecular engineering programme, ran from nineteen eighty-two to nineteen eighty-six, and was limited to the agriculture and agro-food fields. It sought to remove obstacles to the transfer into practice of the advances in biological research. It was successful not only in scientific terms, but in catalysing trans-frontier collaboration within our community, through

transnational cooperation in research, and through training grants for researchers moving to laboratories outside their home country.

Our current biotechnology research action programme runs until nineteen eighty-nine. It covers a wider range of subjects, including topics of importance to all the bioindustries, both in *research*, and in improving the *infrastructure* for research. We expect to expand the programme further in the near future. You will probably hear more about these activities during the course of the seminar.

I should mention also that the breadth of biotechnology inevitably involves several other research areas, such as our agricultural research, our medical research, and (of particular relevance to this seminar), our programmes of *science and technology for development*. The first of these programmes concerned tropical agriculture, health and nutrition. It ended in December 1986; and we hope shortly to finalise a substantially larger effort in the same areas, including a greater involvement of laboratories in developing countries.

We also plan a major new biotechnology-based initiative to stimulate innovative developments at the interfaces between industry and agriculture. The industrialist, the farmer and the scientist must work together to demonstrate and develop these innovations. This programme will seek to develop:

- New *crops*, better adapted to market needs in both food and non-food applications;
- New processes for cultivating and harvesting crops, for splitting them into their constituent elements, and for transforming these into higher value products;
- New approaches to the *control of pests and diseases*, and to the control of nutrition and metabolism in plants and animals. In this or in other programmes, we shall be continuing research on the assessment and management of any related risks.

But our policies for biotechnology in Europe go beyond research. They interact with our plans for agricultural and industrial development, for safeguarding the environment, and for developing harmonised regulatory regimes in the Common Market. They include matters

ranging from price regimes for raw materials, to refinements of the laws on patents and on plant variety protection.

In the context of this seminar, I want to emphasise the international, indeed the global, dimensions of biotechnology. The techniques, products and services of biotechnology are of central importance to countries rich or poor, at every stage of their economic development. Here in Europe, we believe we have major strengths and capabilities in biotechnology, and we want to talk about these with you during the coming days. We are also sure that we can learn from your experiences in your various countries. I recognise that we shall have some differences of opinion – that makes it all the more necessary to continue our dialogue, on occasions such as this, and to understand the basis for our differences. But above all, we believe that we have a common interest in learning together how to develop and use biotechnology for your needs and ours, whether we speak of social needs for health care and basic nutrition, or needs for commercial and competitive developments.

Let me cite some practical examples. There is much fashionable talk about the hypothetical risks of biotechnology. When we talk about the needs for better vaccines, diagnostics and therapies, we are not talking hypothetically, but about real, current and continuing disasters; about hundreds of thousands of people round the world dying daily, to-day and every day, from avoidable causes, from starvation and preventable disease. We have the technology to produce the food; we have vaccines and therapies for many of the diseases that are still killing people. Through the methods of biotechnology, we have good prospects for developing vaccines against major diseases not yet curable, for example through our new ability to study the constituent parts of viruses, and to manufacture in large quantities and high purity their antigenic proteins. The development of monoclonal antibodies is providing precise and effective diagnostic tools, and the basis for delivering drugs to precisely targeted cells in the body. Such technologies are essential in the continuing battle against parasitic diseases such as Chagas' or to combat the continuing and ever-changing challenges of malaria. They are equally needed to confront novel challenges such as the AIDS virus. *The major risk to be avoided is the risk of unnecessary delay.*

Concern is sometimes expressed about the impact of biotechnology on the environment. Around the world, some two hundred million people are engaged in 'slash and burn' agriculture. Of course, they are driven by their local necessities; but by their actions, they are destroying the remaining areas of tropical forest, with a loss of species estimated at several hundred per day. We are likely to lose half of all current species within twenty years; it is an environmental catastrophe, a species extinction of a magnitude unparalleled since the death of the dinosaurs. It is not hypothetical; it is happening now. Yet biotechnology can offer the means to feed the world's whole population more than adequately, using far less land than we cultivate today. Further major gains in agricultural productivity are now seen to be possible. By pursuing these, we should be able to take the pressure off the environmentally sensitive areas, such as the uplands and the wetlands, the unique ecological habitats. We should be able to defend our forest, be it in temperate or in tropical zones, and restore our environment, replanting appropriate species in degraded areas such as, here in Europe, parts of our Mediterranean littoral.

I do not want to be simplistic about the practical difficulties which inhibit the application of the new technologies to the problems of health care, agriculture and environment. The political and economic difficulties are often greater than those of science and technology. And above all, the application of new science demands adaptation to local conditions, and integration with local knowledge. Therefore collaboration and dialogue are essential, and our joint learning will inevitably have to proceed through trial and error.

To put biotechnology to work requires men of action, bringing together managerial abilities, local knowledge, capital and science, and there must be a functioning system of trade. The successful application of biotechnology depends on appropriate exchanges, not only of the ideas and results of R&D, but also of the capital investment and trade in goods and services which follow from the success of such research. There is no alternative to progress in the liberalisation of world trade. The policy of the European Community, which is the largest trading bloc in the world, is to work seriously for the improvement of the current conditions of world trade, through the GATT framework. For we know, not least from our own experience within Europe, from Germany's Zoll Verein in the nineteenth century to our community of to-day, that trade is a 'non-zero-sum' game, in

which all players can win. But this policy has to be accompanied by adequate measures in the same direction by the other important trading countries. We are happy to see the corresponding bilateral and multi-lateral agreements developing between countries within Latin America, and between Latin America and Europe. These developments provide the context within which biotechnology can thrive, encouraged by the prospect of global market opportunities, and driven by the social and economic needs to which biotechnology is relevant.

A subject which must raise, in connection with world trading conditions, is that of intellectual property. As our world economy evolves more and more towards knowledge-based industries, an effective international system of respect for intellectual property is increasingly essential. It is a mistake to see patents or plant variety rights as systems defending the rich against the poor. Many biotechnology innovations may be realised by small enterprises. In order to encourage innovation, it is essential to provide adequate protection; and such protection facilitates technology transfer, where secrecy would inhibit it. As our biological science advances, the principles of protection for innovation are just as applicable to plants, foods and medicines as they have been to electrical or mechanical devices.

We understand the strong desire of developing countries – indeed, of all countries – to have effective control of science and technology. But if we wish to enjoy the full benefits of science and technology, activities which are as international in their sources as in their applications, then we have to accept the fact of growing international exchanges. Recent historical experiences show that escape from economic and technological dependence is not through isolationism, but by increasing participation through new creative models of involvement of worldwide developments and consequent *interdependence*. The need again is to work together to define fair conditions for such interdependence.

The scientists have delivered the goods, in terms of basic advances in understanding and techniques. In Europe, we have recognised their importance in the amendments to the treaty which are coming into effect: the Single Europe Act gives an explicit legal base for our science, technology and development activities. We have been debating with our

Member States the final details of our overall R&D programme, in which biotechnology is a major element.

So if science and politics are playing their part well, they provide to the businessmen, the entrepreneurs, the means and the possibilities for innovation, investment and hence economic development. I hope that many contacts will be made at this seminar, and that seeds of awareness will be sown in these three days and in your visits to our Member States. We must develop greater awareness of one another's needs and capabilities, and hence build co-operative and continuing relationships, which will help us to develop and to share our advances in biotechnology and to apply them to the achievement of our social and economic objectives.