

European research for facing the challenges of the 21st century.

Maive Rute,

Director "Biotechnologies, Agriculture and Food", Directorate-General for Research, European Commission, Brussels, Belgium

The world is changing. Both demographics and economics suggest that the 21st century will be the Asian century. In the European Union, we are also at a point of change, a newly elected European parliament and a new Commission being installed at this very moment. In this time of change, however, one thing is very clear – research will be at the centre of coping with future developments and at the centre of policy developments in Europe and world-wide. Research will be a critical factor for generating the knowledge needed to guarantee a sustainable economy based on growth and jobs while protecting the planet for future generations. Two of the so-called grand challenges where biotechnology will be particularly important will be in the fields of climate change and in food security. These challenges are not solely European and not solely Asian – they are truly global. In this context, the European Commission has already targeted international linkages at the core of our framework programmes for research, which are fully open to international cooperation, and these linkages can only increase.

Europe is in the midst of a long process of developing a European Research Area, where free movement of knowledge is seen as a critical factor, but we recognise that this movement of knowledge, and of the people who generate it, cannot, and should not, stop at Europe's borders. In this context, and in addition to supporting cutting-edge research, we now have renewed focus on innovation and technology transfer.

Biotechnology will be a key technology in addressing the global challenges of the 21st century – whether this be in improving health care, addressing the depletion of fossil fuels, assisting in reducing the effects of climate change, guaranteeing the sustainable production of enough food for a world population expected to top 9 billion by the middle of the century, or sustainably exploiting the potential of our oceans. It also is a key technology in attempting to address the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations. Biotechnology will, therefore, remain an important part of European research. While we have a lot to bring to the debate on the use of biotechnology, we also have a lot to learn and to gain from the debate. It is within this context that our funding revolves around the concept of mutual interest and mutual benefit, with the long-standing cooperation between Europe and India in the research field standing as an example of what can be achieved.

In 2010 we will be looking at defining our strategy in Europe for the next 10 years – the 2020 vision. At the same time we will be refocusing our efforts on the bio-based economy in order to make it fit for the future. To this end, we will be producing a new vision and action plan later this year and conferences such as this one will be important sources of ideas for defining that policy.