

21 March 2023

Press release



Gezondheidsraad

Dutch advisory councils: Urgent decisions needed on biotechnology



The Netherlands is ill prepared for the rapid developments in biotechnology and is missing out on opportunities to make full use of its economic and social potentials. But as well as major opportunities, biotechnology also brings risks to people and the environment. And for that reason, the government should prepare an integrated vision and carry it through. This is the central message of the Biotechnology Trend Analysis 2023, presented today to the Dutch Government by COGEM and the Health Council of the Netherlands.

Developments in biotechnology are advancing at a breathtaking pace. The potential benefits are enormous: biotechnology can make a major contribution towards achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the EU and national goals for the circular economy, healthcare and the transition to sustainable food production. For example, microorganisms such as bacteria, fungi and yeasts can be used to make products now manufactured by the petrochemical industry (fuels, plastics), while gene editing can speed up the plant breeding process to produce crops that are more tolerant of heat, drought or saline conditions and resistant to pests and diseases. Biotechnology also facilitates significant advances in healthcare, such as the control of infectious diseases (Covid vaccines), cancer treatments and the prevention or treatment of genetic disorders.

However, these technological developments also raise legal, social, ethical and economic issues. The legislation should leave room for innovation, but at the same time it must minimise the risks to human health and the environment. Opinions differ on what is acceptable and what is not, such as altering human embryos or animal and genetically modifying crops. On these and other issues, well-informed and balanced decisions must be made soon.

At the moment, government initiatives are piecemeal and lack clear objectives. If we are to exploit the opportunities presented by biotechnology in a responsible and accountable manner, we urgently need a long-term vision and direction. COGEM and the Health Council of the Netherlands call for a government-wide approach involving scientific institutions, societal stakeholders and the business community.

The publication Biotechnology Trend Analysis 2023: A call for vision, decision and direction can be downloaded from www.cogem.net and www.gezondheidsraad.nl.

If you have any questions, please contact Gerard van Roon, tel. +31 6 117 97 052, or Annelou van Egmond, tel. +31 6 224 25 903, email: pers@gr.nl.