

The Panel of Scientific Advisors of the ICGEB

Report of meeting on 20-21 June 1985 -- Rockefeller University

A meeting of the Panel of Scientific Advisors of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology was held on 20-21 June 1985 at Rockefeller University in New York City, U.S.A. Dr. Joshua Lederberg, President of Rockefeller University and a member of the Panel was host for the meeting. A list of attendees is attached.

Trieste Workshop

The Panel considered the matter of the topics, dates and format of the second technical workshop of the ICGEB, which the Preparatory Committee had recommended to be held in Trieste in the Fall of 1985. The Italian Coordinating Committee had previously submitted an outline of possible topics for the workshop, which had been distributed previously to all Panel members as part of a briefing paper by the Project Leader.

The Panel noted that the Italian proposals included subjects that may be considered to be part of a very general area called "health." This led to a discussion by the Panel of the range of topics specified in earlier documents to be included in the respective work programmes of the Trieste and New Delhi components of the ICGEB. It was noted by several panelists that the discussions of the work programme at their previous meeting, and the report of that meeting, may have created the impression that the panel had endorsed those activities designated for New Delhi while being very critical of those activities designated for Trieste. The panelists stated that although they had expressed reservations about some of the topics set forth for the Trieste component in UNIDO Document "Note Regarding the Draft Work Programme of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology" (PSA/1/2/Add.1) at their February meeting, their remarks should not be taken to preclude these or other activities as being carried out in the Trieste facility. While recognizing that a very general division of topics and the approaches used between the two components was appropriate, it should not be taken to mean that the inclusion of human and animal health in the New Delhi component as a major activity should imply that all topics having something to do with human or animal health would be automatically excluded from the Trieste component. The Panel requested that the report of this meeting clarify for the record their views on the matter of the work programme in order to avoid any further misunderstanding.

At the same time, the members of the Panel of Scientific Advisors were reminded by Mr. Kamel of the UNIDO Secretariat that the decision of the Plenipotentiary Meeting on the Establishment of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotech-

nology, held on 3-4 April 1984, had decided that the Centre will be located in two components, one in Trieste, Italy, and the other in New Delhi, India. The decision on this subject was made taking into account the offers made by the governments of the two countries which, among other things, specified general areas of concentration between the two components of the ICGEB, namely industrial microbiology in the Trieste Component and agriculture, human, and animal health in the New Delhi Component.

The Panel noted that industrial microbiology or industrial biotechnology, suggested as the primary focus of the Trieste component, was itself a vast area and included such subjects as the production of enzymes, pharmaceuticals, food supplements, chemical feedstocks and other organic polymers, among many others. In as much as the workshops are intended to help define the research agendas for the two components, the Panel noted that it would be appropriate to include subtopics in industrial biotechnology other than those discussed in Document PSA/1/2/Add.1.

Accordingly, the Panel proposed that the Trieste workshop be held on the general topic of Biotechnology and Industrial Commodities, with focus on four subtopics. A program committee consisting of Drs. Bolivar-Zapata, Chakrabarty, Narang and Zimmerman from the PSA and Dr. Tocchini-Valentini from Italy was suggested. The rationale for selecting the subtopics and a tentative agenda and proposed speakers were prepared and have been distributed to all PSA members. The dates 27 October - 1 November were recommended for the workshop, with the proposal that the Panel of Scientific Advisors of the ICGEB meet in Trieste immediately thereafter, that is, on 2 - 5 November 1985.

Governance of the ICGEB and the Role of Director

The Panel discussed possible candidates for the Director of the ICGEB. However, the choice of a Director must depend somewhat on the function the Director is to perform. The Panel felt that the roles of the Director and the two component heads needed to be further clarified. The panel devoted some time to the discussion of this subject and different members expressed different opinions as to what the role of the overall Director, or Director-General, should be. Dr. Lederberg was not convinced that this person would have to serve full time, if indeed the programmatic content of each component would be the responsibility of the head of that facility. Others felt that Director-General must be a full time position; that there were many functions that would require the attention and leadership of a single prominent individual. The panelists present did not reach a decision on this matter.

After considerable discussion, the panelists recommended a list of potential candidates for Director-General, and instructed the Project Leader to send these to the panelists non present for their comments and for the suggestion of additional candidates.

The list includes individuals of various backgrounds since it is not yet clear just what the role of the Director-General will be. The proposed candidates are:

Melvin Calvin	I. C. Gonzales
Sidney Brenner	Francois Gros
Arturo Falaschi	M. Grunberg-Manago
Lawrence Bogorad	A. O. Lucas
Alex Kessler	Irving London
Chris Walsh	Carl-Goran Heden
Gus Nossal	Lennart Philipson

After comments from the entire Panel are reviewed by that body, a final list will be prepared. Individual panelists will contact the people on that list to determine if they are willing to serve as Director-General, after which the names will be submitted to the Preparatory Committee in accordance with the procedure adopted at the Sixth Session of the Preparatory Committee ("Conclusions and Decisions," ICGEB/Prep.Comm./6/13).

Affiliated Centres

The panel noted that nine applications for Affiliated Centres had been received by the UNIDO Secretariat. A preliminary review by the Secretariat revealed that additional information would be required of most of the countries submitting these applications in order for them to be evaluated according to the criteria set forth by the Panel at its last meeting. The Panel will begin reviewing applications in the near future, with the needed supplementary information to be collected and passed on to the Panel members. The panelists should have completed their preliminary review of the applications by the time of the Panel's next scheduled meetings so that it can recommend action to be taken on all of the applications at that time.

Other Matters

Dr. Lederberg raised the matter of how the ICGEB, to be sure a rather small organization, can effectively address the needs of developing countries, and how this can be done through biotechnology. He pointed out that achieving the objectives of the ICGEB went well beyond purely technical considerations. He suggested that the ICGEB sponsor some workshops on policy, to focus on how biotechnology can be effective in meeting the needs of developing countries. The needs must first be clearly defined. Then the factors that limit productivity must be identified, and the limitations on the amount of biotechnological improvement, including non-technical limitations, must be accurately assessed. Such an assessment clearly depends on political, economic and cultural factors. Dr. Lederberg expressed the view that few countries have the resources to plan and implement programs based on advanced technologies. While they may have a great deal of enthusiasm about new programs like the ICGEB, they often lack the

academic infrastructure needed to sustain such programs in their countries. Thus such a workshop should include not only technical people, but government planners and others who ultimately make the decisions in these countries. The Panel did not make a formal recommendation but considered this an appropriate activity for the ICGEB after it becomes operational with ongoing programs.