

## **New EU life sciences and biotech strategy would help people and the planet**

Written by Joanna Dupont Inglis on 15 October 2019 in Opinion Plus  
Opinion Plus

The EU must embrace biotech's potential to help make Europe the world's first carbon neutral continent, argues Joanna Dupont Inglis.



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President-elect Ursula von der Leyen's mission to make Europe the world's first carbon neutral continent is a noble aim.

She has rightly identified new technologies and common values as being essential to ensuring we live on a healthy planet.

Also, key to delivering on her ambition must be a new EU life sciences and biotechnology strategy; the block's first since 2002.

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## Time for first life sciences and biotechnology strategy since 2002

We await the arrival of a new European Commission in the days following Biotech Week 2019 and EFIB (Europe's leading event on industrial biotech and the bioeconomy).

During September and October these events brought thousands of experts together - from many different sectors of the economy - to discuss the transformational change that biotechnology can bring for people and the planet.

Biotech applications are enabling enormous advances in industry, healthcare and agriculture that contribute to European and global sustainability. We now need these benefits to be recognised and incentivised in a comprehensive strategy.

Since the EU's 2002 life sciences strategy, biotechnology has become increasingly integrated into the European and global economy.

The widely recognised role that digitalisation will play in the fourth industrial revolution is likely to be matched by the biologicalisation of many industries; often supported by the new CRISPR genome editing tool, which represents a technological milestone in terms of speed, accuracy and the potential for new therapies, products and processes.

## Biotech solutions are inspired by Life

Biotechnology is a broad and complex science based on studying and learning from living organisms and systems.

It incorporates a multitude of diverse applications, in different sectors, with the potential to solve critical societal challenges, including many of those identified by the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Whether its applications address the unmet needs of patients, the challenge of feeding and nourishing a growing population, our ecosystems under pressure or the threat of climate change, the biological world provides the starting point for developing a vast range of solutions.

The roots of the word biotechnology are 'technikos', meaning 'human knowledge and skill' and 'bios' which means everything to do with life.

"Despite the regulatory and policy roadblocks to biotechnology that have hampered its development, the European biotech sector leads the world in some areas of research and

development"

## **Improving healthcare**

Biotechnology helps us to better understand and utilise the systems of the human body to deliver new treatments and diagnostic tools that save lives.

According to a recent [report](#) [7], there is now a 72 percent likelihood that new treatments for cancer or rare diseases will be developed by an emerging biopharma company.

EuropaBio's healthcare members currently spend €62bn per year on R&D (16 percent of their revenue), creating life-enhancing and extending therapies for the EU's 30 million sufferers of rare diseases, for whom 160 drugs have already been approved in the EU.

This will be key to delivering on the Commission's foreseen mission on cancer.

## **Reducing emissions**

The Commission's new 'European Green Deal' should fully recognise biotechnology as a tool to for reducing levels of man-made emissions and the impacts of climate change.

For example, GM crops have led to a reduction in agricultural chemical use of up to 37%, with especially marked decreases when it comes to insect resistant GM crops. GMO adoption has also enabled savings of CO2 emissions from farming by the equivalent of taking 16 million cars off the road.

Also, did you know that in 2018, European biorefineries produced almost six billion litres of ethanol, 82 percent of which was used as an alternative transport fuel, with an average of 71% GHG savings compared to petrol?

"Plastic packaging for cheese made from milk waste, car tires made from dandelion rubber, bikes made from bamboo, coffee cups made from coffee grounds, T-shirts made from trees: These are just a few of the bio-based products developed in recent years"

## **Enabling the circular bioeconomy**

When designing its Circular Economy Action Plan, the EU must recognise the huge opportunity for a circular bioeconomy developing smart, sustainable products and processes.

Plastic packaging for cheese made from milk waste, car tires made from dandelion rubber, bikes made from bamboo, coffee cups made from coffee grounds, T-shirts made from trees: These are just a few of the bio-based products developed in recent years.

Despite the regulatory and policy roadblocks to biotechnology that have hampered its development, the European biotech sector leads the world in some areas of research and development.

It is led by a dedicated, inspired and highly-skilled community of research and development intensive businesses, scientists and researchers, excelling in collaboration.

However, compared to competitors in the US, they are all too often operating in a risk-averse, overly cautious political environment that hinders the EU's potential to innovate.

If the new EU institutions are serious about shifting up a gear in their ambition to deliver a greener, healthier future for Europe, the moment to embrace the potential of biologicalisation is now.

A new EU life sciences and biotechnology strategy is the starting point.

### **About the author**

Joanna Dupont Inglis is Secretary General of EuropaBio

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[Bio-economy](#) [11]

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