

# Science for people

“The ERA-NET provides a real opportunity to close the gap between scientific and social perceptions of genomics, as Europe starts to explore this challenging and complex field.”

As the controversial introduction of GM crops has shown, understanding the societal aspects of new science is critical to the success of its commercial application. Genomics has huge potential to deliver social and economic benefits in many fields, from health care to industrial processing. But it is complex and radical, and may therefore disrupt existing social structures and relationships. NORSAGE will identify and bring together emerging national initiatives to support research into societal aspects of genomics, in order to accelerate learning, spread its results, and coordinate efforts at European level to improve their efficiency and impact.

*This is a preparatory project. The consortium will use it to look for additional partners and to define the workplan for a full Coordination Action under the ERA-NET scheme.*

Proponents of genomics – which exploits new genetic knowledge to understand and manage the way that genes function in cells, body organs, whole organisms and species – have long claimed that it will ‘change everything’. In fact, significant genomic applications in health care, medicine, nutrition, agriculture, process industries and other areas of economic activity will soon become available at last. They may not change everything, but it is certain that they will have a major impact on many of the cultural, social and economic structures and interactions that characterise society today.

Will our relationships with our doctors change when we depend for the reliable diagnosis of our illnesses not on their professional skills but on automated genetic testing procedures? They undoubtedly will. But genomic applications will also change many other sets of relationships – between individuals, organisations, institutions, and economic and social groups. These effects, and their acceptability to those they touch,

themselves constitute a field in which research is urgently needed.

The societal component of genomics research is currently relatively small. But it will have profound consequences for society’s ability to accept, absorb, manage and benefit from this powerful new realm of scientific knowledge. Addressing genomics’ ethical, legal and social implications, such research focuses on the influence the science will have on social and economic relations – including human attitudes and behaviour towards future generations, towards other species and towards the wider environment.

## Accelerated transnational learning

At the European level, research into the societal aspects of genomics is not only small in scale, but also badly fragmented – both between countries and between scientific disciplines.

The Netherlands is probably the Member State that has gone furthest to support a coherent research effort on genomics’ societal components. The Nationaal Regie-Organ Genomics or Netherlands Genomics Initiative (NGI) has launched a national programme specifically addressing these aspects, and has established a national Centre for Society and Genomics (CSG). The United Kingdom and France also have schemes to support research in this area, though these are not yet coordinated nationally. Elsewhere, both top-down and bottom-up initiatives are being discussed,



## Specific support action



“ I am looking forward to understanding and discussing different national attitudes to genomics. We need to learn from each other. ”

**Full title:**

Network observatory for research on societal aspects of genomics

**Research field:**

Genomics

**Coordinator:**

Netherlands: Nationaal Regie-  
Orgaan Genomics

**Further information:**

Drs W.M. Beer, Katholieke  
Universiteit Nijmegen fac NWI, afd  
Filosofie  
PO Box 9010, Nijmegen, 6500 GL  
Netherlands  
Fax: +31 24 355 3450  
m.beer@sci.kun.nl

**Duration:**

12 months

**EC funding:**

€170,000

**Project reference:**

SSA-510231-NORSAGE

and are expected to lead rapidly to concrete action as governments and scientists recognise the urgent need to plan and manage the interface between genomics and society.

Now NGI is using the ERA-NET scheme to accelerate these developments, to spread them to new Member States and Accession countries, and to coordinate their efforts at European level in order to improve their efficiency and impact. NORSAGE is a Specific support action whose ultimate aim is to create a transnational consortium of programme managers to prepare a proposal for a follow-up ERA-NET project. In the meantime, it is undertaking the essential preparatory steps of mapping current research on societal aspects of genomics across Europe, and of identifying opportunities for practical, long-term complementarity, synergy and collaboration between national programmes.

### Mapping and matching

NORSAGE is starting by compiling inventories of existing research groups and projects, of national funding programmes, of evaluation and assessment systems, and of training programmes, to provide a comprehensive overview of the status quo as a basis for networking and collective strategic thinking. Four regional workshops will bring together Europe's key players in the field of the

societal aspects of genomics, providing for the very first time a forum for collective learning through the exchange of information and ideas, and a starting point for the planning of cross-border initiatives and collaboration. A final European workshop will present the results of the four regional events, and will define the goals and structures of the subsequent ERA-NET.

Genomics itself is a new science, employing a new style of multidisciplinary laboratory research, while societal aspects call for new links between the physical sciences, social sciences and humanities. By facilitating such interactions, the linking of Europe's currently diffuse and disparate initiatives is expected to give an immediate boost to genomics research – and may, in fact, lead to new joint research activities within the Science and Society programme of FP6.

But the Specific support action has a much wider ambition. NORSAGE creates a framework for open, well-informed dialogue between scientists, scholars and stakeholders on the social and cultural impacts of genomics, and for the long-term integration of European efforts in this area. It will therefore help to bridge the gaps that have bedevilled another recent application of new scientific knowledge, GM foods – gaps between scientist and citizen, between knowledge and emotion, and between fundamental and applied research.