

# Unido's ICGEB: A Case of Petty Politics Prevailing Over Scientific Peer-Reviews\*

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The international scientific community should be informed of the development during the process of establishing the so-called ICGEB (International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology) initiated by UNIDO (the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation) and gain from using it as a case study of how political manipulation can interfere with and prevail over the process of scientific peer-review. Biotechnologists and immunologists in developing countries in particular, whose work and opportunities can be directly or indirectly effected by this mishap should heed the tragic changes of events ensued.

Biotechnology including cell immortalisation through cell fusion and/or transformation and recombinant DNA technology has been well recognised as promising bases for a new era of scientific and technological revolution. With these tools, appropriate microbial, plant and animal cells can be manipulated according to design to enable production of higher quantity and quality of food stuffs, other agricultural and agro-industrial products, pharmaceuticals, biologically active macromolecules etc. In immunology itself these tools have already led to the elucidation of the molecular genetic bases of biosynthesis of specific antibodies; of cell interactions in immuno-regulation. The resultant libraries of cloned

genes, of B-cell hybridomas and monoclonal antibodies; of cloned T-cell lines and cell interaction macromolecules including lymphokines, interleukins and one of the interferons; of cell surface differentiation, allotypic, idiotypic and anti-idiotypic markers have opened up the possibilities of elucidating detailed immunopathophysiological sequence of events at the cellular and molecular levels in a wide range of human diseases. These also make it increasingly possible the production of improved diagnostic reagents; and immunoprophylactic, immunotherapeutic and immunomanipulating agents at lower costs.

A wide gap of know-how already exists between the developed and the developing countries and with the rapid nature of development in these areas the gap can easily widen even more rapidly and promises to place the least developed countries at further disadvantage and an ever more technologically and economically dependent position.

A group of scientists mindful of international development recommended to UNIDO in 1981 that an international centre should be established to help developing countries to close this gap. In order for the centre to be successful and viable they also recommended a set of criteria based on scientific capability and socio-economic infrastructure for the selection of the

location in a suitable host country. A meeting of interested countries at various levels of development was convened in Belgrade in December of 1982 in which participating countries enthusiastically endorsed the concept. As far as the location was concerned, since several countries proposed to host the centre, a decision could not be made and the meeting resolved that it should be in a developing country if there is one that meet the stringent set of scientific and financial criteria agreed upon and that a *Selected Committee* consisting of scientific experts appointed at the meeting be charged with the responsibilities of evaluating the relative suitabilities of each candidate host country on the basis of the scientific and socio-economic criteria above and that the results of evaluation of this committee will be the basis of a decision on the location to be made by a ministerial level meeting to be convened subsequently.

The *Selected Committee of Experts* proceeded to make extensive and intensive site visit in each of the candidate countries, i.e., Belgium, Cuba, India, Italy, Pakistan and Thailand spending 7-10 days in each country from March to May of 1983. They unanimously recom-

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mended that Thailand is the only developing country that meets all of the scientific and socio-economic criteria and is therefore a suitable host country for ICGEB. Up to this point the ideals and the legitimate process of establishing the centre were upheld and selection of the location was to be based on scientific peer reviews through the site visit, a well established and accepted procedure among all in the scientific community.

Tragically, as soon as the results of the scientific peer review was announced, certain parties began to resort to other means in supporting their own candidacies. Political manoeuvres began to enter the scene. Thus the noble ideals, the sound scientific criteria, the requirement for thorough analysis of financial feasibility were one after the other disregarded with apparent cooperation of some in the UNIDO secretariat. The devotion, the efforts and the recommendations of the Selected Committee of Experts similarly became increasingly disregarded and the mandate of the Belgrade meeting was evaded. With these behind-the-scene manipulations, the Ministerial Level Meeting in Madrid in September 1983, which was supposed to make an easy and legitimate decision based on the recommendation of the Selected Commit-

tee of Experts, became instead a political forum *par excellence* to the disillusion and disgust of all scientists present. As a result, again a decision on the location could not be reached. This time a "Preparatory Committee" was formed to work out compromise in order to reach a consensus. During the work of this committee the political element became more and more predominant and was eventually manifested in the form of an imposed decision by a vote totally disregarding the preceding legitimate mandates, resolution, recommendation and most tragically the shattering effect of such an imposition of will on the good will and the spirit of international cooperation. A substantial proportion of delegations found it unacceptable and declared non-participation in the voting and left the meeting. Regardless of the recognition that such imposition of will was devious, those parties seeking to impose political will persisted with unprecedented stubbornness and repeated the damaging acts in a Plenipotentiary Meeting in April 1984 when 12 of the 25 participating delegations either walked out, declared non-participation in voting or voted against the location of ICGEB in Italy and India. None of the countries from Asia and Africa endorsed the locations. With

this scenario and with the facts that none of the most advanced countries in biotechnology, e.g. U.S.A., U.K., France, West Germany, Canada, Japan etc. is likely to participate, the UNIDO's ICGEB is considered dead by scientists witnessing the progression from noble ideals to ugly political manipulations. The most advanced countries were perhaps wise and well experienced with UNIDO and were alerted to the likelihood of such a political imposition and tragic outcome and decided from the onset to stay out.

Together, it was a sad lesson but perhaps an important one if the international scientific community can use this as a case study of how noble ideals and genuine efforts by many can be destroyed by a few who seek to impose their wishes and will on all. This is an important lesson as the need to close that technological gap still need to be met and all should not be discouraged from seeking other mechanisms to bring this important field to the benefit of all developing countries. Any future schemes to be established can gain from the lesson learned in this case study and scientists will persevere and eventually prevail over political lobbyists and truly serve the needs of all nations.