SPEECH/08/

Androulla Vassiliou

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

Introductory Speech for the 1st International Conference on Risk Assessment: "A Global Risk Assessment Dialogue"

Introductory Speech for the 1st International Conference on Risk Assessment

Brussels, 13 November 2008

I am delighted to be here today to address this first International Conference on Risk Assessment.

I see this Conference as a first step in a lasting process intended to build a sustainable international risk assessment dialogue. I am committed to supporting this process and, in this respect I look forward to the conclusions and recommendations of the Conference.

The launch of this global risk assessment dialogue is very timely. We have entered a period of profound changes. In particular, 2009 will be a year of changes and new priority setting at EU level. At the Commission we are now thinking ahead as to how the context of our action is changing. We have identified four main drivers of change for the EU health and consumer policies: the changing society, globalisation, confidence and governance.

In a recent conference on the future challenges for the EU health and consumer policies, several issues and concepts were highlighted which are very relevant as background to this Risk Assessment Conference. (Some of the most relevant are highlighted in red in the slide shown)

This global risk assessment dialogue is in particular very closely related to the issues of **globalisation**, **interdependence,** and the **role of science in ensuring public confidence and effective risk governance**.

Policy makers around the world today face the common challenge of reconciling innovation with sustainable growth and a high level of health and environmental protection.

The most recent developments of science and technology are opening up unprecedented prospects for innovation. Scientists have learned how to manipulate matter at the **nanoscale**. Living organisms can be transformed through gene technology. Information technology, cognitive sciences, biotechnology and nanotechnology are converging to open up new technological frontiers.

These trends bring important benefits: economic growth, a better quality of life, job opportunities and more consumer choice – all of which depend of innovation. But… there are also risks, or at least potential risks, that come with them.

Mobile telephones, the products of nanotechnologies, animal cloning, but also more anodyne products such as personal music players are examples of recent outcomes of innovation with questions surrounding potential health risks.

The sustainability of current technological trends depends, in turn, on our ability to ensure good governance concerning the potential risks associated with new technology.

,All across Europe the public expects technologies and products to be **safe** and often sees science and new technology as a source of risk. At the same time, they trust scientists more than industry and politicians as a reliable source of information on possible risks. They expect science to identify health risks and to provide the knowledge that producers and risk managers need to prevent them.

Our citizens also expect to **reap the benefits of innovation and progress without harming the environment**. Science contributes significantly to global efforts to tackle climate change because it drives innovation in combustion, emission controls and other human activities which could contribute to climate change.

Globalisation of trade, production and technology has boosted growth in many countries. It has also introduced a new dimension to risk governance. I would subscribe to what Tony Blair said at the World Economic Forum in 2007: "**interdependence is the defining issue of the 21st century**".

Experience shows that direct and indirect impacts of all kinds of risks, from financial to natural and technological ones, spread rapidly across the globe. In most cases, purely **national** or even **regional responses** are not enough. **Interconnection and interdependence are global** nowadays.

In the not too distant past, the BSE and dioxin crises, and the more recent avian influenza and SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) scares, are some of the more glaring examples of crises that went **beyond national or regional borders as a result of globalisation**.

Science, in particular scientific risk assessment, plays a key role in enabling good risk governance. The EU is fully committed to science-based risk management. Scientific risk assessment **provides the necessary basis for effective and efficient risk management measures**. It is the basis for effective risk communication, transparency on risks and for the necessary dialogue with the general public.

The pursuit of effective, global risk governance starts with international dialogue and collaboration on the underlying **science**. This is why the European Commission has organised this Conference and is keen to engage in a sustained Global Risk Assessment Dialogue.

We are convinced that, although international harmonisation of risk assessment is not on the cards, it is to our mutual benefit to promote collaboration between scientists and bodies involved in risk assessment in the pursuit of **a common risk assessment framework**.

The EU has recently engaged in a Transatlantic Dialogue on Risk Assessment with the US and Canada. The motives for this dialogue are very similar to those behind the initiative of this Conference. More international dialogue and collaboration on risk assessment will enhance our collective ability to ensure the best risk governance. They will also facilitate consistency in our approaches and understanding of our respective policies in this area.

No doubt, the experience with the Transatlantic Dialogue will help to develop a broader international dialogue.

I wish now to highlight just a few of the topics, which are to be covered at this conference, and I would also like to pose some questions myself.

The first issue is **uncertainty** in risk assessment.

One of the major challenges that policy makers have to address in their risk management decisions is **uncertainty**.

Policy makers want to get clear and useful conclusions concerning risks. At the same time, they also need a clear description and understanding of the uncertainties underlying such risk assessment conclusions.

Some sources of uncertainty are: the **quality** and **quantity** of scientific data, information on how a particular situation results in exposure of humans or the environment to certain hazards, expert judgement, even the words we use to describe risks.

There are different practices on the treatment and communication of uncertainties. How can we work together to identify best practice in this area and ensure a more consistent approach?

Transparency is a key requirement for the risk assessment process.

Risk assessment is as much a science as it is an art. Professional judgment, hypothesis and assumptions, probabilities, are an inevitable part of the process.

There is nothing wrong with that, as long as full transparency is ensured.

Lack of clarity and transparency may compromise the value of risk assessments to risk managers, to the public, and to international trade partners. We have much to benefit from further discussion, in this area.

Another area of risk assessment where different approaches often lead to divergent results is **the way we measure and quantify exposure of humans or of the environment** to various agents.

Simple, everyday things like wearing a shirt, taking a bath, playing in the playground, take a different, rather complex, dimension when it comes to measuring and quantifying exposure to chemicals from the shirt or the bath lotion or the playground equipment.

I look forward to feedback from this Conference on what could be done in order to set up a framework for more consistent exposure assessment.

Finally, I believe that this risk assessment dialogue should address the most relevant emerging issues and challenges in risk assessment, like the potential risks of new technologies, and new methodological challenges. How can we pool the available expertise in order to ensure rapid progress and prevent inconsistent approaches?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that a sustained risk assessment global dialogue requires a collective effort and is obviously a long term endeavour. I am sure that today and tomorrow you will make a decisive first step by reaching consensus on the priority areas and themes for a continued dialogue.

This conference is an exciting opportunity for discussion between some of the most qualified experts in this field! I hope that this initiative will lead to more opportunities such as this one in the future.

I wish to conclude by assuring you of my full commitment to support the continuation of this dialogue. I am also determined to ensure that the development of this global risk assessment dialogue remains high on the Agenda of next Commission.

Let me wish you a very fruitful discussion.

Thank you for your attention.