Adviesraad voor het
Wetenschaps- en Technologiebeleid

A**W**T

Technology and Society;
advisory report on technology for tomorrow

Summary of advisory report 6

Over the centuries technology has played an essential role in numerous countries'
development. This is certainly true of the Netherlands where the Dutch used technical
resources in their fight against the encroaching water. But technology has not only been
deployed to cope with impending threats; it has also been a major aid in creating new
opportunities and powerful economic activities. A good example of this from the past is ship-
building both as regards the ship-building activities themselves and the way in which ship-
building was instrumental to Dutch trading activities.

Present day society is being confronted with new threats and opportunities. The current
accelerated autonomous development of technology is in itself generating opportunities. Dutch
business and industry have to keep in the race if they are to survive in economic terms. At the
same time the scale and manner of deploying technology may jeopardise the lives of future
generations. It is only right therefore at the present time that the concept of sustainability is
increasingly coming to prevail. Survival in the long term is what is at stake. When sustainability
is spoken of it is frequently with reference only to environmental aspects. The Council wants to
place the concept of sustainability in a wider context and speak of survival both in an economic
as well as an ecological sense.

The threat of flooding to the provinces of Holland and Zeeland in the Netherlands was one so
self-evident that it resulted in a virtually unanimous national effort. Today the challenge is
economic and ecological survival. But this too cannot be achieved without a united national
effort. To the Council's mind the political and social answer to the challenge of economic and
ecological survival touches the essence of the relationship between technology and society.

Political circles and society at large are still not sufficiently aware of the need to mobilise all our
forces. Technology is of crucial importance in such a national effort. There is no question of
technology being rejected on a wide scale in the Netherlands. The willingness to accept our
technological heritage and thus the underlying technology is great, especially when a
demonstrable personal interest is at stake, such as health or convenience and benefits for
individual consumers.
But besides the fascination with technology and the avid way it is being used, there is also fear
and uncertainty as to the unforeseen, major effects of technological applications. This fear is
partly caused by the growing complexity and (apparent) uncontrollability of technology. What
we need therefore is for technologists and society at large to communicate properly on the
desirability, potential and threats of technology. Such dialogue will have to explain the path we
are to pursue and the conditions that have to be met if we want to survive economically and
ecologically as a society. Only then will there be the right climate and the community support
which is needed to make a national effort of the kind being advocated here.

The Council is glad to see that the Minister for Economic Affairs and the Minister of Education
and Science and a number of organisations in the community recently took new policy

initiatives to give greater currency to what technology in society involves. But the whole exercise still lacks bite; the policy initiatives are quite unrelated to one another and it is still not enough. This is why the Council is proposing that alongside the existing initiatives two specific national projects should be carried out. These projects aim at improving the processes for communicating about technology and enhancing investment in the technological knowledge infrastructure.

The subject of the first project is Sustainable Netherlands. This project aims at promoting the development and application of knowledge and skills for the benefit of sustainable development (see note 1) and encouraging the interaction for this purpose between the different parties involved and the civil service departments. It is not just a question of launching new initiatives but improving coordination of the existing initiatives. This is why the Council is advocating the creation of a task force of senior people to give shape to the project, to guide its implementation and to report to the Prime Minister. The task force must also ensure that the subject remains on the political agenda and in the forefront of public interest.

The second project involves an extra investment in wide-band telecommunications infrastructure. Investment in telecommunications generates new services and uses. A modern telecommunications infrastructure is an important factor for enterprises in choosing a place to locate their business. The project will undoubtedly strengthen the economic structure of business and industry. The public at large will also be able to take advantage of the new services.