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Society needs biotech innovation and so it should organize money

President of the European Federation of Biotechnology Marc Van Montagu spoke to Mint about issues that concern him, biotech industry and India

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Bangalore: President of the European Federation of Biotechnology **Marc Van Montagu** is a molecular biologist who pioneered the transgenic technology by discovering the gene transfer mechanism that made *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* a delivery system for making genetically engineered plants. That makes him the father of genetically modified crops.

Twenty-five years, two successful start-ups and several molecular genetics advancements on, Montagu is convinced that genetic modification is the way to avert global food crisis. As founding chairman of the Institute of Plant Biotechnology for Developing Countries at Ghent University in Belgium, he is raising funds and working with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization to enable science-based bio-safety policies in the developing world.



As a board member of the Bangalore-based biotechnology company Avesthagen Ltd, which has put its initial public offering on hold and is trying to raise additional funds till the capital market turns around, Montagu thinks local start-ups everywhere will be key to meeting societal needs. Felicitated by the industry body Association of Biotech Led Enterprises on Wednesday, he spoke to *Mint* about issues that concern him, biotech industry and India. Edited excerpts:

In these uncertain financial times, how will biotech companies raise fund and manage their research and development?

This (start-up investment) is the only way to go. Start-ups should rise up and explain to the financial world why they are essential. Big companies can innovate only to a small extent, it's the start-ups that will bring a variety of innovation. And why do you call it uncertain—the money that was there earlier is still there, it's only fake money that has disappeared. The real

Better communication: Montagu says every region should have local regulatory processes to adapt and test crops in local conditions. Hemant Mishra /Mint

investment will always be there. Society needs biotech innovation and so it should organize money (for it).

Should the government now play a bigger role in funding such R&D?

It can be government; it can be charities and big foundations like the Bill and Melinda Gates

In the national interest, food products have to be cheap which, incidentally, the investors don't find interesting.

Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation or others. Their goal is to reduce hunger in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world. Do you think Monsanto will do it? No. Local initiatives are needed which will come from local start-ups.

India functions in a capitalistic manner so it has to find its own way of funding such activities, though it is not so simple. In the national interest, food products have to be cheap which, incidentally, the investors don't find interesting (as ventures)... But for the societal stability, to avoid political unrest and terrorist activities, food and social security is important. The need is so big...

One of the mandates of your institute at Ghent University is to work on implementation of bio-safety policies in the developing world. Are you aware how India is handling this issue?

Yes. The government should be more direct in answering questions from the public and pressure groups. The moment you let this anarchy go on, people get confused.

But the problem is the public sector and governments are not used to communicating with society, whereas organizations like Greenpeace are adept at doing so—top officials there are not scientists, but communication specialists... Two weeks ago an Irish paper carried a news that 150,000 farmers in India had committed suicide due to genetically modified crops. It's insulting to the Indian government but if it doesn't come forward to clarify the issue, public will continue to believe such reports.

Do we need to rethink our agriculture system? Wheat production has stagnated in the last decade.

Monsanto has some good progress in wheat but it hasn't commercialized (this) because it is expensive. It is waiting for wheat prices to go up.

In Australia, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization has good results in drought-resistant wheat... science can rapidly scale up, the block lies at the level of regulation. Today it takes enormous amount of money to clear the regulatory procedure, which is absurd and will deter the start-ups from entering the market. This way you only perpetuate monopoly. Every region should have clear, local regulatory processes where crops are adapted and tested in local climatic conditions.

This, sadly, is true about the whole world.