

Time to accept the gifts of biotechnology

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The Convention on Biological Diversity at Hyderabad is an opportune moment for the global community to discuss the many biosafety aspects and pave the way for a more robust science-based regime across countries in the world, writes *Ram Kaundinya*

The ongoing meet on Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety as part of the Conference of Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties, in Hyderabad, is a testimony to India's growing stature. India takes over as the president of the CoP from Japan. The CPB, we all know, is an international agreement on biosafety, as a supplement to the Convention on Biological Diversity. The required number of 50 instruments of ratification of the CPB by member countries was reached in May 2003. In accordance with the provisions of its Article 37, the protocol entered into force on September 11, 2003.

The CPB is the only international agreement dealing exclusively with products of modern biotechnology. Naturally, interpretations of its Articles and their implementation have a significant impact on biosafety regulation in developed and developing countries.

It is important to note that the biosafety protocol makes it abundantly clear that products from new technologies must be assessed based on the precautionary principle. For instance, it allows countries to ban imports of a 'living modified organism' if they feel there is not enough scientific evidence that the product is safe. Under its provisions, exporters are also mandated to label shipments containing genetically altered commodities such as corn or cotton.

Clearly, the progress has been slow and there are differences among the parties. To fast-track the progress, at the biennial meet held at Nagoya in Japan last year, Parties adopted the 10-year Strategic Plan (2011-2020) to facilitate the implementation of the protocol. As the president, India must now take the process forward which shall require Herculean efforts.

Among others, insufficient technical human resources, lack of institutional capacities, lack of awareness, insufficient funds for research and development, very few products and irrational protests are some of the key factors that confront many developing countries in their bid to move to biosafety regulations. The ongoing meet considers these challenges as well and efforts shall be made to address these.

It is critical to note that India has moved with alacrity and the role of the private sector has been commendable in collaborating with the Government and ensuring that we had one of the best science-based regulatory mechanisms in place, which the Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jayanthi Natarajan pointed to in her inaugural speech on October 1.

It gives us tremendous satisfaction that, owing to a robust partnership with the Government and global standards pursued by the industry, no single case of biosafety infringement has been reported in the country.

However, given the socio-economic and demographic transformation in the country coupled with challenges of climate change, yields and food availability, we need to step up our efforts in better harnessing of the potential of modern biotechnology. Countries including India, China and Brazil have adopted policies that recognise the critical role that agricultural biotechnology shall play in driving the economies. Also significant public sector research is underway. While China has moved ahead of India in terms of number of crops approved for commercial use, we in India and China both have a rich pipeline of commodity and pro-poor biotech crops under development. Occasions like the CoP-MoP meet fuel our commitments.

On this occasion, it is also heartening to note that we are graduating to a better coordination among the public and

private sectors. Brazil recently approved herbicide-tolerant soybean which is the first example of a biotech crop developed and commercialised through a public-private partnership. The fact that product development of this kind is no longer under the sole purview of private enterprises in the United States, Canada, and European Union has significant implications for both agricultural development and international trade. Developing countries including India too have lessons to learn from here.

The Hyderabad meet is an opportune moment for the global community to discuss the many biosafety aspects as well as operationalise the Cartagena Protocol. This meeting can pave the way for a more robust science-based regime across many developing countries in the world. India, through its slew of measures and a robust science-based regulatory regime, will surely emerge as a showcase country for many other countries in the world.

It is also time we noted that the context for biosafety regulation, in addition to risk assessment and environmental considerations, must also include socio-economic factors including livelihood gains to farmers, food security, rural prosperity. Perhaps it is worth considering the risks of not using biotechnology versus the risk of using biotechnology in order to assess the incremental benefits or risks if any. Along with perceived risks, we must consider the many benefits to environment by biotechnology such as herbicide-tolerant crops, drought-tolerant maize, salt-tolerant rice, nitrogen-efficient sorghum, improving existing plant sources for biomass for ethanol and bio-diesel production, integrated pest management, etc.

(The writer is chairman of Association of Biotech Led Enterprises-Agriculture Group, and CEO of Advanta India)

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