

Biotechnology for a sustainable future

open letter to the Italian Government and the scientific community

The European Union is planning its future with an ambitious programme called Europe 2020, under the priorities of “smart”, “sustainable” and “inclusive” growth. Research and innovation will play a key role in enabling our society to meet the challenges of the next decade. The use of Biotechnology is an important tool for setting up a “bio-based economy”.

Our attention has been recently drawn to an initiative launched in Italy by the Foundation on Genetic Rights, an anti-GMO Non-Governmental Organization: their project “GenEticaMente” is looking at the strategy Europe 2020 with the aim of exporting their model of participatory research to the rest of Europe. This initiative raised an intense discussion, since during the press conference it was announced that a 20M€ investment in the next years will be possible, thanks also to the resources made available by several Italian Ministries. The Italian scientific community expressed many concerns that a considerable budget (1/5 of the total budget in the Italian national programme for research, for all disciplines) could potentially be granted by public institutions without a proper scientific evaluation process. The Foundation clarified that such a budget is not yet available. This budget would be devoted to several actions, including research and innovation on “marker assisted selection” as an alternative to what they call “controversial” GMO biotechnology, and on a specific focus on participatory research on so-called ‘soft’ biotechnologies.

I would like to express the support of the EFB - European Federation of Biotechnology to the Italian scientific community: what happens in one country, is part of a wider European scenario, and the same message has to be spelled out clearly in all the Union. In times of budget cuts and crisis, the investment in Research and Innovation has to increase, and grants should be accessible only upon an independent science-based evaluation. This is the only message for people to build up trust on the results of scientific research, and for young people to have a motivation for choosing a scientific career. We invite all our members, and all scientists concerned to support the online petition started by our Italian colleagues at www.salmone.org.

European institutions since 1985 supported hundreds of public research projects on the safety of GMOs, and their results have been distributed by the European Commission in order to offer the public a clear scientific ground against the many myths evoked by anti-GMO lobbies. Recently the proceedings of a study week at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences have been published on the New Biotechnology Journal, by Elsevier, with the contribution of Nobel prize winners and the most prominent scientists dealing with the most important issues still discussed about green biotechnology and developing countries. Biotechnology is key for a sustainable future, and within biotech research there is no such contraposition as “soft” and “hard” that should limit research funding on to one field.

I’ve been working for a life on green biotechnology, contributing to fundamental advancements in this field: during all my life I always urged my colleagues to engage the public, to open discussions, to consider other arguments. And public engagement and communication is one important activity of EFB. But democracy and public engagement does not mean political control over science, nor does it mean to set aside scientific evidence in evaluating scientific issues, and it also doesn’t mean to support political initiatives by subtracting budget to research and funding for many brilliant young scientists.

We appeal to European scientists to raise their voice, to engage daily with the public and with decision makers as an active component of Society, and we urge the Italian Government not to invest heavily in initiatives that exclude important technologies on non-scientific grounds such as “GenEticaMente”. We hope it will be stated again that funding for research activities has to be always subject to an open scientific evaluation process.

Em. Prof. Marc Van Montagu
President of the European Federation of Biotechnology