

Genetic engineering of food not magic bullet, but important tool

Ronald J. Herring, professor of government and international professor of agriculture and rural development at Cornell University, US, believes that genetically modified (GM) crops have the potential to counter increasing variation in climate systems and the attendant movement of pathogens which threaten agriculture globally. That said, he views the biotech industry's emphasis on GM for food security as mere propaganda. Edited excerpts from an interview earlier this month:

The industry says GM is required to ensure food security. In India we are producing enough, perhaps too much rice and wheat. Yet we have rampant undernourishment. Is this a distribution failure?

It's called capitalism. If you don't have money you can't eat. So you need something like a food security Act but it's not clear if the government can afford it. If you made food available at lower price you'll have less malnutrition. The aggregate amount of food is kind of irrelevant. It takes enormous political will to take money from those who have it to those who don't.

I would say GM for food security is largely propaganda, a spin or a talking point. But the legitimate concern is that with global warming we will have much more variability in climate systems, much more movement of pathogens. Farmers are constantly under mercy of forces not under their control and agri-biotechnology gives a chance to respond to these quickly which cannot be controlled by conventional breeding.

If you take a tool out of a tool kit and throw it away and next year you need a screwdriver, things that didn't need fixing with a screwdriver, in a decade might need fixing with a screwdriver. So if you ban these technologies, the next time there is a food crisis we will be in trouble. For instance, there is a global problem in citrus greening and banana production; ringspot virus is destroying the papaya crop; how do you respond to these specific new threats?

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