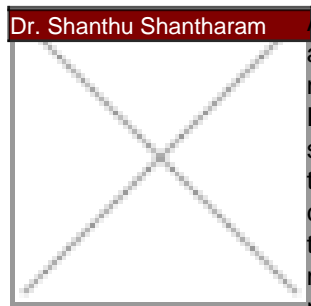


At last, a New Year and a New Biotech Policy!

16 December 2004 | News



Dr. Shanthu Shantharam

At the outset, mighty congratulations are in order for the Union Minister of Science and Technology and Union Secretary of Biotechnology for putting together a task force to draft a critically needed national biotechnology policy. It was really unfortunate that the previous leadership at the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) never saw the need for such a policy even when the rest of the stakeholders in the nation's biotechnology development craved for one. No time must be lost by the task force to get down to work right earnestly. But, one cannot help but wonder how any task force can whip out a draft policy document in three months. For a monumental job like drafting a technology policy document for a country like India, one would need at least a year. This time, it must be done right and there should not be any hurry. After all, the DBT ran without a policy for more than a decade. What is one more year!

There has been huge cry for public participation in formulating the biotechnology policy and for a good reason. Biotechnology today is caught in a global whirlwind of controversies and emotional debates. Public acceptance of biotechnology will be the litmus test of any sound technology policy, and this taskforce must ensure it steadfastly. In order to ensure a meaningful public participation, it is necessary that the task force hold town hall style meetings (public hearings) in atleast half a dozen centers in the country and pro actively seek inputs by opening an interactive website for this purpose. The website must be updated daily and all the deliberations must be posted to make it completely transparent. In the end, the DRAFT policy must be posted for public comment for a finite period of time before finalizing it. All of this will take time and cannot be done in three months. The composition of the task force as it stands has very many eminent names and all of them are known to be extremely busy, and remains to be seen how much of quality time they can devote to this exercise in the next three months. The only way for them to do it is to devote their time fully to the task to the exclusion of other responsibilities. Is that

realistically possible?

In any case, it is important for this task force to pay attention to some of the burning issues of biotechnology. The number one issue is the biotechnology regulatory policy. The task force has to push for an independent statutory regulatory body. DBT must completely get out of regulating any aspect of biotechnology as it is an agency that is in the business of promoting biotechnology to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest. The second issue is technology development policy to promote public-private sector partnership and private investment in biotechnology development. Adjutant to the second issue is the policy on IPR in the context of WTO compliance. A pragmatic policy on IPR (Intellectual Property Rights) is the one in which there is a good measure of protection for really innovative and novel researches combined with benefit sharing commensurate with the amount of indigenous and traditional knowledge utilized. There must be a better way than what US or EU policies are on IPR. Third issue must be to tackle is the appalling standards of biotechnology education in the country. What is going on out there in the name of biotechnology education is a farce, and it must be set right forthwith. A biotechnology education council is one way in which to establish minimum standards for college level biotechnology education and curriculum. This council must be empowered to give accreditation to biotechnology programs and it must do away with undergraduate education in biotechnology altogether.

Perhaps, it is the time now to review the performance of various biotechnology taskforces that have dispensed research grants in the country as long as DBT has existed. The entire peer review system needs overhauling to ensure only high quality proposals get funded and only priority areas identified. Perhaps, it is also time to scrap the overseas science advisory committee of DBT whose contributions to the developmental biotechnology in the country is questionable. Because biotechnology is at the center of very many societal controversies, it is crucial that study section on social, ethical, legal and economic impacts of biotechnology be instituted. It would have been really beneficial if the biotech policy taskforce included a couple of social scientists. To support the biotechnology regulatory oversight body, it is equally important to set up a new study section on biotech risk assessment research on an ongoing basis. Three main task forces to cover agricultural, biomedical and environmental biotechnology should be considered as permanent pillars for future biotechnology policy development. No technology policy can be rigid much less biotechnology as it is a rapidly evolving field. One should be happy if a current policy regime can cover it for about ten years. A sound technology policy formulation supported by a proper infrastructure can be dearly costly. But, that is the only way to do it right. Happy New Year!