

Public-private partnership

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Networking and meaningful collaborations between the public and private institutions must be encouraged to develop research competence

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Our country can boast of having many public institutions and university labs that have the research competence to develop biotech products. However, examples of successful product development and commercialization by these centers are few and far between. It does not in any way justify the public resources spent over the years, both on the physical infrastructure as well as on the scientific talent. Often times, it has been the lack of product-focus that leads to the wasteful dissipation of the limited resources. Such a situation can be condoned if we are making path breaking discoveries that will give us a leadership position in the scientific world.

The stark fact, however, is that our scientific output in the life sciences area, if measured in terms of the number and quality of peer reviewed publications, is not commensurate with the public money spent on these centers. While it is true that there are several instances of subcritical infrastructure and sub-optimal project funding, resulting in all the resources and time being wasted, that is not always the case.

The real value of biotechnology is in products, especially in the context of a country like India. While there is a further need for creating research facilities and capacity building for life science research, there must be an immediate review of the projects to bring about a focus on products or solutions to specific problems. This can be brought about by encouraging networking and meaningful collaborations between the public and private institutions. One of the first scientific leaders of our country to recognize this fact is Dr Joseph Thomas, who after a distinguished stint as a scientist at the biological sciences division of the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) went on to become a founding member and head of the biotechnology division of the SPIC Science Foundation, a fine research center established under the aegis of Southern Petrochemical Industries Corporation, one of the leading corporations in South India, in the late '80s. He then went on to help in establishing a biotechnology department in the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai. In the numerous committees of the government and the research advisory councils of public institutions that he served with distinction, he stressed on bringing the public and private sectors together in a binding partnership for product development. At 73, when he was still very active as a thought leader and a much sought after speaker, he suddenly passed away just a few weeks ago. He will surely be remembered, not just as a very good scientist, but as one of the early driving forces behind the now growing momentum towards forging public-private partnerships in the Indian biotech sector.

In recent years, there is a growing incentive for the private sector to make investments into life sciences research and development. Such investments are beginning to bear fruits. However, resource constraints, and the high risk perception, especially of regulation and value capture for biotech products, have made the private sector take a rather cautious approach towards research. Innovative ideas, which are usually attended by a high risk of failure, are often not pursued. Government support directly to the private sector can mitigate the risk of such research projects so that the capacity and experience of the private sector is leveraged appropriately for development of novel products that can have value in addressing the health and agricultural problems of our country.

The new biotechnology policy unequivocally recognizes the importance of the private sector participation in biotech innovation. In the 11th plan it sets aside 30 percent of the budget of Department of Biotechnology, which is indicated to be around Rs 6,500 crore, for Public-Private Partnership Programs. Some quarters have expressed concern on whether our establishments and systems can absorb such an investment to produce the desired outcomes. I believe that given the size and needs of our country and the promise that biotechnology holds in addressing our problems, this public investment in research and development cannot at all be seen as excessive. However, it calls for prudence and efficiency in spending if the full value of this investment has to be realized in the next five years. In the hurry to spend the allotted budget, as we have seen often happening in government, if we have a situation where "money chases the projects", we will see this investment squandered on dud projects. On the other hand, if done wisely, this investment can prepare India to take its rightful place among the global biotech industry.