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Norway says 'no' to genetically modified seeds

Sarah Hiddleston

CHENNAI: "The main instrument for global food security is national food production. Every country has an obligation to provide food for its own population. Trade alone cannot solve the fundamental challenges regarding hunger," believes Norwegian Minister of Agriculture and Food Lars Peder Brekk.

When agriculture is Norway's second biggest national industry and provides for half of the Norwegian people's needs, it's no wonder that he sees eye to eye with India on the need to take care of his country's farmers in the face of challenges from the World Trade Organisation.

"We say that agriculture is linked to where people live, where they have their homes; we want production in every part of the country," he said during an interaction with journalists at *The Hindu* here on Monday.

To that end, Norway's farmers are heavily subsidised through a lengthy consultation process between government and farmers' cooperatives that takes place each year – a policy instrument that is being rolled back under WTO liberalisation agreements. But, he says, the subsidies are not just a question of economics, there is a question of securing rural livelihoods.

His government has said 'no' to genetically modified seeds and other imports – three applications for GM maize are still pending. He said that his government was pursuing a different route – increasing crop productivity by releasing the untapped potential of grains to be water-efficient and nutrient-efficient.

"We know we will be challenged by international companies... They have patented their products and want to sell them in Norway," he said. "But who do you want to lead the market? Is it in the production around the country or is it in the hands of one big company?" he asked, expressing the hope that through publicly-funded research it may be possible to separate the debate between the science of genetic engineering and the big business of corporate agriculture.

Norway has its own goals on sustainable agriculture. Today 5.7 per cent of land is given over to organic production but the government hopes to push that to 15 per cent.

Moreover the Norwegian Parliament recently approved his department's white paper linking agricultural policy with climate change. Norway will manage its topsoil, make better use of forest resources to reduce CO2 levels, try to find ways of developing biogas, make

provisions for targeted research into pests and plant disease, and contribute 0.1 per cent of the value of seeds sold in Norway to an international fund designed to ensure the benefits of plant genetic material are shared with developing countries.

“We must try to find balanced solutions [to climate change]... I understand fully that India must have the possibility to grow. The starting point is rich countries. We have to deliver.”

Mr. Brekk, who was in India for the launch of an international conference on biodiversity and climate change, will meet his counterpart in Delhi next week.

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