

Translation Mike Mack interview in
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“Organic farmers can’t feed the world”

**Michael Mack, CEO of the crop protection group Syngenta,
on the myths of organic agriculture and the benefits of pesticides.**

Mr. Mack, you head a company that sells pesticides and genetically modified seeds. How easy do you find revealing that at cocktail parties?

Very easy, since I know the contribution Syngenta makes to feeding the world. I am proud of our crop protection products and seeds, and proud to be working for the world leading company in this industry. I’m also fully aware of the emotional impact that terms such as “pesticides” and “genetically modified plants” have on people, especially if they live in urban areas. It is a real effort to convince them that food doesn’t grow in the supermarket.

Where do you get a more positive reception for your business – in New York, Berlin or New Delhi?

Americans are less concerned or critical towards biotechnology than Europeans. Apart from that, there is less positive reception the further you get away from a farm. No matter what continent you’re in, people in cities are more receptive to the myths around organic agriculture.

Which are?

For instance, that organic agriculture is the only way of providing sustainable, long-term food security. That isn’t the case.

Most Europeans think that pesticides and genetically modified seeds are dangerous and unnatural. They can’t be entirely wrong in their views?

As a matter of fact, they are for a number of reasons. The main one is that there are more people who want to eat – especially meat and milk products. Without crop protection products, the world would only be able to support around four billion people – and not the world population of 6.5 billion that conventional agriculture is feeding now. In addition to that, the development and manufacture of our products is highly regulated. In that respect they are comparable with pharmaceuticals. Conventionally grown foods are neither healthier nor of lower quality than organic foods. I personally prefer conventionally produced food.

You never go to the organic supermarket?

I never buy organic products. I wouldn’t feel any safer doing so. The chemicals used in conventional agriculture have been shown to be safe in hundreds of studies and intensive approval procedures. As a consequence, I trust the food that’s cultivated using them. I don’t know what products are used on organic farms and what tests

they have been subjected to. And one should stay clear of the idea that something is healthy simply because it's natural.

But organic farming pollutes the soil far less than conventional agriculture.

Firstly, that isn't the case, and secondly, it ignores an important calculation: if your harvest is 30 per cent less, either you're producing too little food or you have to use 30 per cent more land to come up with the same harvest as now. Organic farming would have to reclaim an additional area of land twice the size of India to come up with the same yields as now.

But one fact is clear: industrial farming and monocultures have a considerable impact on biodiversity.

Yes, intensive professional farming practices have an impact on biodiversity. But let me say it again: the alternative is to sacrifice untouched land and forests. That would have a much more negative impact on biodiversity. That said, Syngenta is working in many countries on programmes aimed at improving the biodiversity in conventional agriculture. We support the farmers to not farm on strips of land around their fields and offer them special seeds for planting in that 'set-aside' land – this produces refuge areas for natural plants and animals. We also support seed banks aimed at maintaining the natural diversity of plants for future generations.

But in the end, your business is not unfarmed strips of land but maximising yields.

No doubt: our job is to help farmers maximise yields from each hectare of land – without losing sight of sustainability. The only way to achieve this is the use of high-quality seed and the use of products to combat the fungal diseases, pests and weeds that threaten harvests.

You're saying we have to bid farewell to the old image of the farm with a cockerel perched atop the dung heap, happy farmers, lots of farm labourers and a few horses, cows and pigs...

That image hasn't applied for over 50 years. It's the romantic perception of people who don't know how food gets onto their table.

So industrial farming is the future?

It has been for ages – and it's good that it is. Farmers with the cockerel scratching about on the dung heap, to stick with that image for a moment, have to work extremely hard. Go and visit peasant farmers in mid-China or India who lack the equipment, fertilisers or crop protection products needed to farm efficiently. There's nothing romantic about their lives, which we who live in cities try to idealise. Lots of these poverty-stricken farmers are drawn to the big cities to seek better times for themselves and their families.

You'll have to destroy a whole load of children's books about life in the country!

That's not what I want to do. However, I do think we also have responsibility to provide them with a realistic picture of how food is produced.

People are already going hungry. What should we be doing to win the fight against hunger?

Farmers currently produce around two billion tonnes of cereals annually. That will have to rise to three billion tonnes sometime between 2030 and 2040, because the world population is growing and because growing prosperity is changing dietary habits. People are buying more meat, eggs and cheese, which means we have to maximise yields per hectare.

Which in turn means better treatments against crop diseases, weeds and insects, and genetically modified seeds...

All that, plus other products we haven't even developed yet.

Why does Syngenta hardly do any business where need is greatest, such as Africa?

For one thing, the political circumstances in many countries constrain the development of a productive agriculture. And large parts of Africa have soils and climatic conditions that are so poor that we are barely able to make a substantial difference with our products. And there's another thing: although the countries get urgently needed food aid, their agriculture doesn't receive enough support to become professional. Some of the aid organizations even constrain development by fostering anti-technology practices.

Can we produce enough food to feed the world?

In principle: yes. The world is able to produce enough food and animal feed – and can even use some of the plants to produce energy.

Growing plants for energy has pushed up food prices. Lots of poor people are going hungry again.

I believe that the role of biofuels in the price increases has been substantially overstated. Some five per cent of agricultural production is currently devoted to biofuels. The high prices are mainly a sign of markets recognising that food availability could be compromised in the medium term. Recent years have already seen demand regularly outstrip supply. High prices are a wake-up call and an encouragement to improve productivity on the farms.

So are higher food prices good news for Syngenta, because farmers are investing more?

High food prices are a problem – even life threatening – for hundreds of millions of people living in poverty without sufficient access to food. On the other hand, if farmers get more for the food they produce and can invest more in their farms, that's good news – and it also helps combat rising prices. In order to find a balance, agriculture should be at the top of the political agenda.

Separate box:

Number one „on the field“

Syngenta CEO Michael Mack runs a paperless office. Everything that is important, the American has in his mind or on his hard disk. With that, a former position in his career, heading a paper company, is history.

The 48 year old manager joined Syngenta in 2002. After heading the Crop Protection business in North America, he was appointed to the Executive Committee in 2004 to head the global Seeds business. Since beginning of 2008 he is Chief Executive Officer of the agribusiness company.

Syngenta was formed in 2000 as a merger of the ag-businesses of the pharmaceutical group Novartis and the British-Swedish pharmaceutical company Astra-Zeneca. Syngenta claims the leadership position in agribusiness, as it sells more crop protection products than anybody else and only a few sell more seeds; but the group offers no fertilizers.