

Contact: Dr. James B. French
Secretary-General &
WAP Coordinator, GCHERA
jimbfrench.gchera@gmail.com



Press Release

GCHERA Announces 2021 Laureates of the Prestigious World Agriculture Prize

GCHERA (Global Confederation of Higher Education Associations for Agricultural and Life Sciences) is pleased to announce the **2021 Laureates of the World Agriculture Prize, Emeritus Professor Marc Van Montagu of Ghent University, Belgium and Professor Mitiku Haile, Founding President of Mekelle University, Ethiopia** in recognition of their outstanding achievements in agriculture and life science education and scientific research.

The two laureates will each be conferred the prize via an award ceremony on **June 21, 2022** transmitted virtually from **Nanjing Agricultural University**, the People's Republic of China at 1 p.m. in China, 5 a.m. UTC. The prize for Dr. Van Montagu of 100,000 USD is generously sponsored by the **Education Development Foundation of Nanjing Agricultural University** and **Da Bei Nong Group** and the equivalent prize for Dr. Mitiku is sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation via the American University of Beirut and GCHERA Transforming Higher Education Project. The ceremony will be held beginning at 1:00 p.m. at Nanjing, China (+8 GMT), June 21 and at 7:00 a.m. (+2 GMT) at Ghent, Belgium and 8:00 a.m. (+3 GMT) at Tigray, Ethiopia.

Emeritus Professor Marc Van Montagu



Emeritus Professor Marc Van Montagu of Ghent University and Founder and Chairman of VIB-International Plant Biotechnology Outreach-Ghent University will be awarded the 2021 GCHERA World Agricultural Prize in a global ceremony to be held on June 21, 2022 transmitted virtually from Nanjing Agricultural University Peoples Republic of China at 1 p.m. in China, 5 a.m. UTC.

With this award GCHERA (Global Confederation of Higher Education Associations for Agricultural and Life Sciences) recognizes Professor Montagu's exceptional and significant lifetime achievements in the field of agricultural and life sciences.

Dr. Van Montagu, together with his close colleague the late Professor Jeff Schell and their team at Ghent University, was responsible for the discovery of the Ti-plasmid of *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* and *Agrobacterium*-mediated gene transfer. Their discovery and research laid the foundation for establishing a major tool for plant genetic engineering, and Dr. Montagu's intellectual leadership led to the development of tools enabling plant molecular biology studies and applied knowledge in the plant sciences.

The impact of their discovery was a rapid adoption of *Agrobacterium*-mediated plant transformation by the scientific community leading to a worldwide boom of academic and industrial laboratories focusing on, as explained by Dr. Boerge Diderichsen in his nomination letter, "a new field of plant biology enabling the study of the role of plant genes and plant gene mutations in plant growth and development, the defence of plants against biotic and abiotic stress conditions and more". He goes on to affirm that "These discoveries, that are now used in every plant biology lab worldwide, revolutionized our knowledge about the molecular mechanisms behind plant growth and development, and the use of that knowledge in agriculture."

Dr. Van Montagu's lab at Ghent University became a leading lab on plant molecular biology and provided numerous tools for the plant research community. His global impact on plant biotechnology includes the training in his lab of hundreds of scientists and researchers from around the world who have gone on to take leading positions in academic institutions and agricultural companies. Scientists who gained experience in his labs have gone on to establish plant biotechnology labs around the world including in Japan, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and the United States.

Dr. Jo Bury, Managing Director of VIB in his nominating letter stated that "Dr. Marc Von Montagu is one of the few people who is simultaneously a world leading scientist and an innovator who excels in converting his breakthrough inventions in products that are now available to millions of people." He shares that Marc has "been both visionary and highly productive in the translation of his basic research to products for society." He founded two highly successful biotechnology

start-ups: Plant Genetic Systems and CropDesign that led to the development of transgenic crops resistant to insect pests and tolerant to environmentally benign herbicides.

Plant biotechnology applied to the development of genetically modified crops has been an innovative disruptive technology. Its first pursuit aimed to increase yields, reduce crop losses to pests and diseases, and to decrease agrochemical use. Since its introduction, genetically modified crops have accounted for millions of tons of food, feed, and fibre worldwide. Despite the early criticism it has been reported by ISAAA and PG Economics Limited that crop biotechnology has resulted in improved productivity and profitability for more than a million adopting farmers. Of note, it has directly led to poverty alleviation among resource poor farmers and landless depending on agriculture, which represents most of the world's poorest people. Smallholder farmers in developing countries (approximately 65 million people), benefit not only from increased crop yields and higher profit but also from the change in farming habits to become more environmentally friendly by reducing carbon emission and use of pesticides.

In recognition of these accomplishments Dr. Van Montagu was designated Goodwill Ambassador for the development of agribusiness in low-income countries by the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation in 2014. Dr. Van Montagu has been especially active on capacity building in low- and middle-income countries and, in 2000, he founded the Institute of Plant Biotechnology Outreach (IPBO), hosted by VIB, dedicated to promoting sustainable socio-economic development and the transfer of know-how and expertise on plant biotechnology to less-developed countries with the purpose of improving crop quality and productivity in marginal environments of low-income countries, with a view to improving human nutrition and developing solutions to address the impact of climate change impacts on tropical agriculture.

Marc continues to communicate the benefits of plant biotechnology around the world. As stated by Dr. Huanming YANG, Professor of BGI-China in his Nomination Letter "Marc has been the champion of utilizing plant biotechnology to combat climate change. Marc and Mrs. Nora Van Montagu have also established the 'Marc and Nora Van Montagu (MNVM) Fund' to utilize plant biotechnology to address societal and environmental challenges facing the scientists, the farmers, the children and their families and local communities in Africa."

Professor Mitiku Haile Laureate 2021



Professor Mitiku Haile, Founding President of Mekelle University and Professor of Soil Science and Sustainable Land Management in the College of Dryland Agriculture and Natural Resources, Mekelle University, Ethiopia, will be awarded the 2021 GCHERA World Agricultural Prize in a global ceremony to be held on June 21, 2022 transmitted virtually from Nanjing Agricultural University Peoples Republic of China at 1 p.m. in China, 5 a.m. UTC.

With this award GCHERA (Global Confederation of Higher Education Associations for Agricultural and Life Sciences) recognizes Professor Mitiku's exceptional and significant lifetime achievements in the field of agricultural and life sciences.

Dr. Mitiku has spent over 30 years in leadership positions in higher education in Ethiopia and is recognized for his contributions to building educational institutions, human capacity development, and his dedication, and impact on the sustainable development of the Tigray Region of Ethiopia and beyond. His greatest achievement is the founding of Mekelle University and its impact on the development of his country under his leadership.

As stated by Dr. Zeray Alemseged in his recommendation letter "Professor Mitiku pioneered the birth and expansion of Mekelle University shepherding the institution from its modest beginnings as college of Dryland Agriculture and Natural Resources to what is today a prominent Ethiopian university enrolling over 30,000 students. In addition to his leadership activities, he has also been heavily involved in teaching and mentoring students including PhD and postdoctoral research fellows." The importance and relevance for Ethiopia of Dr. Haile's efforts and vision is recognized by Dr. Alemseged; "Going back to the university today one can see that Professor Mitiku's vision has become an intellectual monument."

Dr. Mitiku's innovative leadership characteristics have been widely recognized in carrying out research, teaching and work with the communities; he is famous among his staff and students for his professional values, which are evident in his rigor and scientific method in the service of humanity and human progress, advancing knowledge, practically oriented teaching style and emphasis on skills and attitude. Dr. Mulugeta Gebregziabher shares in her letter of support that "Some of his best qualities that deserve underlining include his principled and egalitarian approach to life, his respect for the dignity of each individual regardless of background and his overall fatherly dedication to nurturing his students." He has consistently sought to provide conditions and opportunities for gender equality in all his endeavors throughout his professional career.

While assuming the leadership of building a major university Dr. Mitiku projected the critical role that universities play in innovation, research, and supporting and driving community development which he led through his own research and by promoting and mentoring the university's research and outreach efforts directed towards the sustainable development of the Tigray Region and beyond. He has played a pivotal role in the sustainable development of the Tigray Region providing the Regional Government with technical and strategic advice over the last 30 years in his efforts to rehabilitate the degraded drylands of the Region. His research approach has been recognized by Dr. Joseph Deckers, in his support letter, as "truly participatory and farmer-driven, right from the conceptualization of research themes through to empowerment of farmers while participating in the research process." He also contributed to the development and strengthening of key institutions in Tigray such as the Sustainable Agriculture and Environmental Rehabilitation of Tigray (SAERT) and Tigray Agricultural Research Institute (TARI). He is recognized for research that he led in collaboration with the International Livestock

Research Institute (ILRI) and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) that led to “Policies for Sustainable Land Management on the Highlands of Ethiopia” for which he was granted the 2001 Neville Clarke Award for Outstanding Team Work.

His research approach led to enhanced development of practitioners’ and local community capacities to lead national Soils and Water Conservation programs that have significantly reduced land degradation, depletion of ecosystem services and biodiversity loss and that has ensured the long-term productivity of marginal lands and family farmers. Dr. Haile’s considerable innovative research has benefited the scientific community and the local communities on the ground. He continues to devote efforts to restoring degraded drylands in Tigray. Mitiku’s footprint in the rehabilitation of degraded drylands in Tigray is enormous. His efforts have earned him the title of “**father of restoration**” by the local community.

Dr. Haile continues his commitment to the development of his country and the Tigray Region in particular through education, research, mentoring and community engagement. As Dr. Decker shares “Although Prof. Mitiku has already reached retirement age, he is continuing his teaching and research under the horrendous situation of the on-going war in Tigray. This is the third war he and his family are going through, but he is persevering in his mission, convinced that also this war will come to an end and science-based wisdom will be more needed than ever to rebuild Tigray from its ashes.”