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Annual meeting of AUDA-NEPAD African Biosafety Network of Expertise Technical Advisory Committee



Group picture of TAC members with some AUDA-NEPAD staff

The members of the Technical Advisory Committee of AUDA-NEPAD's African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) held their annual meeting from 7 - 6 June, 2022 in Accra, Ghana. In the current third phase of the ABNE programme, the financial year runs from June to May, hence the holding of the TAC meeting in this period of the year.

In his opening remarks, Dr Dave Keetch, TAC Chair and Director at Goldamer Consulting cc, South Africa, commended the AUDA-NEPAD team for their efforts and the excellent work done in the implementation of the ABNE programme. "The few challenges faced by the programme are more political than scientific issues," Dr Keetch said, encouraging the team to maintain the same enthusiasm in the coming

years.

On behalf of Ms Nardos Bekele-Thomas, the AUDA-NEPAD CEO, Mr Martin Bwalya, Director of Knowledge Management and Programme Evaluation welcomed TAC members to the meeting. He highlighted the important contributions of the ABNE programme in the biotechnology and biosafety sector in Africa in past years and the need to shift gears to respond to the growing needs and demands in the continent.

Mr Lawrence Kent, Senior Programme Officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) also pointed out the hard work reflected in the achievements of the reports

submitted by the AUDA-NEPAD team. "Agricultural productivity is needed more than ever in Africa", he said. He added that safe technologies and best agricultural practices are needed for the continent to address key challenges like the fall armyworms and to reach self-sufficient food production.

Dr Douglas Buhler, Assistant Vice-President for Research and Innovation at Michigan State University (MSU) acknowledged the tremendous contribution of Dr Ibrahim A. Mayaki, former CEO of AUDA-NEPAD to the establishment and growth of the ABNE programme. He congratulated the new CEO, Ms Nardos Bekele-Thomas on her appointment and wished her the best in her new role.

At the end of the two-day discussions, the TAC members recognised that the long-standing collaboration of AUDA-NEPAD, BMGF and MSU has been essential for the success of

ABNE. They also made important recommendations to help achieve more results.

Among their key recommendations, TAC invited ABNE to take more into consideration the existence of other relevant related activities in AUDA-NEPAD and the African Union, and the need to collaborate more in order to realise complementarities and synergies.

The TAC recognised the benefits and role of virtual programming and requested ABNE to exploit the advantages of this technology. The committee also advised ABNE to prioritise its activities on the basis of its immediate, medium and long-term goals. Beyond the annual review of implementing reports and work plans, it was also recommended that there should be more frequent contact to appreciate the progress and challenges and be of support to ABNE.

Senegalese Parliament Adopts a Revised National Biosafety Law

The National Assembly of Senegal unanimously adopted the National Revised Law on Biosafety on 3 June 2022. Abdou Karim Sall, Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development defended the bill before the parliament, highlighting its relevance in the current context. In their deliberations, MPs commended in particular the inclusive approach that prevailed during the drafting of the revised bill, that allowed openness and information sharing with all the stakeholders concerned, including parliamentarians, at all stages

of the process.

Senegal ratified the Cartagena Protocol in 2003 and adopted the first national law on biosafety in 2009. However, this 2009 law had strict liability clauses that proved not conducive to the development and safe use of modern biotechnologies in the country.

The revision process of the law started in 2015 with the technical support of AUDA-NEPAD ABNE. It was a participatory and inclusive



Senegalese National Assembly in large majority adopted the new law on biosafety.

approach involving honourable Deputies, members of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council and the High Council of Local Authorities, media professionals, producers, representatives of civil society, and public sector agents.

According to Agence Nationale de Biosécurité (ANB) of Senegal, the advantages of the new law include the correction of some incompatibilities of the 2009 law with the objectives of the Cartagena Protocol and the Convention on Biological Diversity; the integration of key aspects of the Nagoya Kuala Lumpur Additional Protocol on Liability and

Redress; and the incorporation of key points drawn from in the recently approved ECOWAS biosafety guidelines.

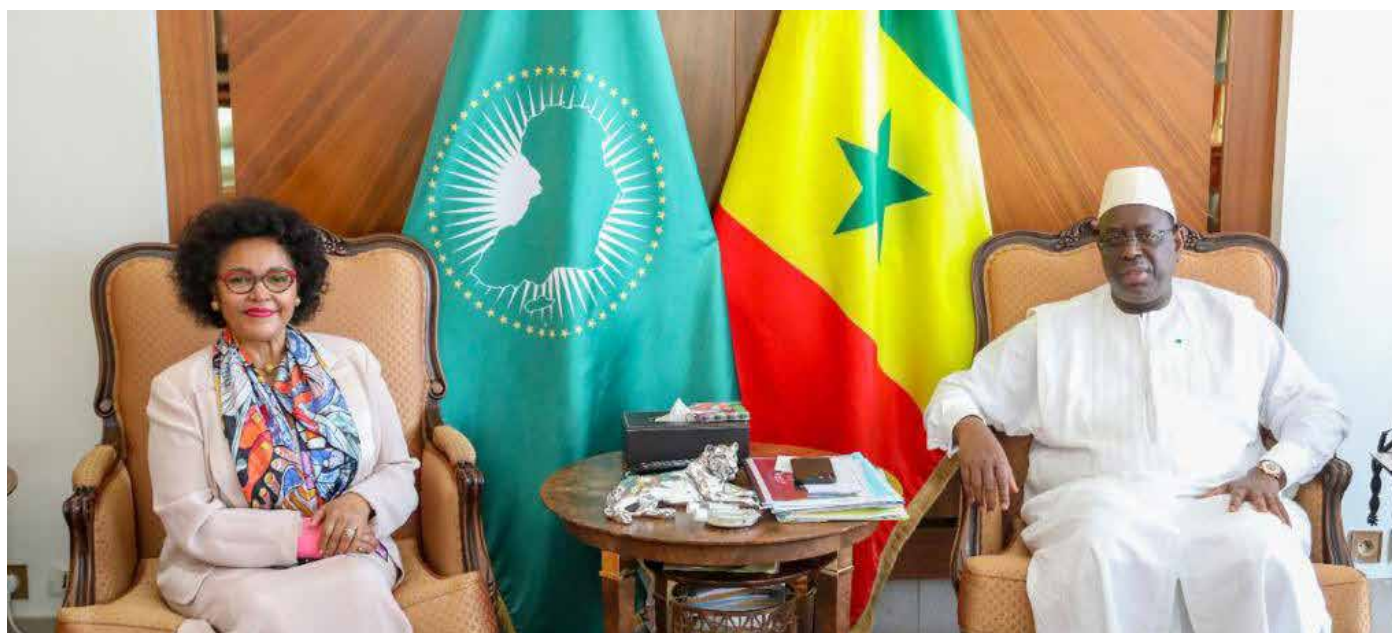
With this new law, Senegal will be able to operationalize its biosafety framework and safely harness modern biotechnologies for its development. In its -10year development plan called "Plan Senegal Emergent" (PSE), structural transformation of the economy and growth is among the 3 top priorities. Creating an enabling environment for the use of technologies will definitely help the country oil the wheels for increased productivity and socio-economic development.



Senegal Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development talking to the media after the adoption of the law

Ms Nardos Bekele-Thomas' Courtesy Visit to the Chair of the African Union

The CEO of AUDA-NEPAD, Ms Nardos Bekele-Thomas paid a courtesy call on H.E. Macky Sall, President of Senegal and current Chair of the African Union, on 8 July 2022 in Dakar. This is the first visit of Ms Bekele-Thomas to Senegal since she took office as AUDA-NEPAD CEO in early May 2022.



Ms Nardos Bekele-Thomas with President Macky Sall during their meeting

During the meeting, the African Union Chair and the AUDA-NEPAD CEO agreed on some key priority areas to focus on in the short and medium term to help meet the goals of Agenda 2063. The priority areas include the development of infrastructure, creating a conducive environment for youth employment, and developing financing mechanisms for the private sector and in particular young entrepreneurs.

H.E Macky Sall held elaborate discussions with Ms Bekele-Thomas on the progress made in executing Agenda 2063, including with respect to his role as one of the Presidential Infrastructure Champion Initiative leaders.

President Sall lauded the considerable efforts by AUDA-NEPAD which are devoted to the execution

of Agenda 2063's First Ten Year Implementation Plan (2013-2023) and welcomed the evaluation and harnessing of lessons learned for the design and development of the Second Ten Year Implementation Plan.

Ms Bekele-Thomas also met with the AUDA-NEPAD staff based in Dakar during her stay. She encouraged staff to pursue the good work they are doing to make sure AUDA-NEPAD fulfills its mandate and better serves the African countries and fulfills its obligations vis à vis various partners.

"Given the international context and the current priorities in Africa, it is necessary to reflect on the best ways of fine-tune AUDA-NEPAD priority areas to better address the needs of the continent," Ms Bekele-Thomas remarked.

Ghana Approves the Environmental Release of the Country's First GM Commodity



The National Biosafety Authority (NBA) of Ghana approved the environmental release of the country's first genetically modified commodity, pod borer resistant Cowpea. The application was submitted by scientists at the Savannah Agricultural Research Institute (SARI) of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

The country has been testing the agronomic performance and the food safety aspects of this genetically modified staple pulse for more than a decade. The *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) gene that confers the insect resistant trait has in particular proven to be effective against the Maruca pod borer pest that destroys most of the cowpea crops in the West Africa region.

Mr. Eric Okoree, CEO of the NBA, stated that this decision is a landmark achievement clearly demonstrating in the capability and capacity of the country to review and make decisions on environmental release applications to ensure the safe adoption of biotechnology products to improve agricultural productivity and to contribute towards sustainable development. Beyond the NBA's biosafety approval, the cowpea would be subjected to processes of the National Varietal Release and Registration Committee of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture before farmers can access the crop for cultivation.

Cowpea is a major source of protein in Ghana and the rest of West Africa. Ghana's annual estimated demand for cowpea is 169,000 tons while the country only produces 57,000 tons per annum. The deficit is met by imports from neighbouring West African countries, notably Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Niger. Nigeria is currently the largest producer of cowpea globally (i.e., %45 of world production) followed by Niger (%15) and Burkina Faso (%6). Nigeria had earlier approved the pod borer resistant cowpea to further increase their market share in the subregion as the market preference is for quality produce. Ghana thus becomes only the second country in Africa to reach the commercial release stage with the Bt variety of this important commodity.

Nigeria adopts national guidelines on genetically modified plants with stacked genes



Group picture of participants at the validation meeting on 25 July 2022, at Denis Hotel in Abuja

Nigeria's biotechnology and biosafety stakeholders validated and adopted national guidelines on the regulation of genetically modified plants with stacked genes, on 25 July 2022 in Abuja. The objective of these guidelines is to provide guidance and information on the risk assessment and risk management requirements and procedures for plants with Genetically Modified (GM) stacked events through traditional breeding or molecular techniques. Gene Stacking refers to the combination of two or more genes of interest in the genome of a single plant.

The guidelines were adopted during a deliberation meeting that brought together officials of the National Biosafety Management Agency (NBMA), Nigeria Customs Service (NCS), National Agricultural Seed Council (NASC), Nigeria Agricultural Quarantine Service (NAQS), National Biotechnology Development Agency (NABDA), Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB), African Union Development Agency-NEPAD (AUDA-NEPAD), Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS), University of Abuja, Federal Competition, Consumer Protection Commission (FCCPC) amongst others.

According to the Director General-CEO of the National Biosafety Management Agency (NBMA), Dr. Rufus Ebegba, the newly adopted document will guide the NBMA in the evaluation of biosafety applications for genetically modified crops with multiple genes, to ensure that the products from this technology are safe for human consumption and the

environment. He stated that the guidelines are to ensure that the genes that are inserted into these GM products confer the expected benefits with no increase in risk compared to their conventional counterparts.

Speaking on behalf of the African Union Development Agency-NEPAD (AUDA-NEPAD), a partner of the NBMA in building functional biosafety regulatory tools, Mr. Samuel Timpo, Principal Programme Officer of AUDA-NEPAD, commended Nigeria and the NBMA for the continually developing regulatory tools that align with international standards and best practices. He further commended the NBMA for an inclusive, participatory and consultative process that led to a fit-for-purpose outcome. He also reiterated AUDA-NEPAD's commitment to continued fruitful cooperation with the NBMA, government institutions, and other stakeholders.

Deliberations on the Revised Draft Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy 2022 in Two Provinces of Zambia

AUDA-NEPAD's African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) provided technical support to the Zambian Biosafety Authority (NBA) in the organisation of a validation meeting on the Revised Draft Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy 2022 for two provinces of Zambia from 13 to 14 May 2022. The two provinces are North-Western and Copperbelt provinces.

Fifty-five stakeholders from diverse institutions including government Ministries, provincial administrations and District Farmers' Unions attended the workshop and gave input into the revised draft Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy 2022.

The workshop was opened by the District Commissioner of Ndola, Mr Maxwell Phiri who highlighted Zambia's need to revise the policy to make the country harness biotechnology and emerging technologies judiciously and safely. Other opening remarks were given by M. Lackson Tonga, CEO of Zambia NBA, and Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo, the AUDA-NEPAD Head of ABNE.



A group picture of part of participants during the meeting

From the contributions of meeting participants, a revised and updated copy of the “Draft Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy 2022” will be developed and submitted to Secretariat consisting of Zambia National Biosafety Authority and staff from Ministry of Green Economy and the Environment for incorporation. It is expected that the revised policy will be adopted during a final national policy adoption meeting that will be held in Lusaka in June 2022.

Creating an enabling environment to safely harness modern biotechnology in Rwanda

AUDA-NEPAD has been working with the Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA) and other stakeholders towards creating an enabling environment to safely harness modern biotechnology as a tool for agricultural transformation and socio-economic development. Recently, a capacity strengthening meeting on review of biosafety applications for research (confirmed field trials) was conducted for members of the national biosafety committee (NBC), which held from 11 – 9 May, 2022. Closely following this activity was a capacity strengthening meeting on biosafety inspection and institutional biosafety committee (IBC) from 13 – 12 May, 2022. Both

activities were held in Kigali, Rwanda.

The Director General REMA, Ms Juliet Kabera, gave the opening remarks at the review meeting with twenty-two participants in attendance. The technical backstopping provided to REMA and members of NBC during the application review meeting resulted in reviewers’ better understanding of biosafety concerns related to the research activity, as well as risk assessment and risk management principles to address identified concerns. This outcome ensured the successful review of the application to conduct confined field trial (CFT) of genetically modified late blight



resistant (LBR) potato and the application to conduct previously approved CFT of cassava brown streak disease (CBSD) & cassava mosaic disease (CMD) resistant cassava in two additional trial sites. The committee finds the proposed CFTs to be low-risk activities, having an acceptable level of risk for Rwanda, and recommended for REMA's approval subject to applicants' compliance with the recommended risk management conditions and to applicants' implementation of corrective measures to address deficiencies communicated to the applicants.

The capacity strengthening meeting on biosafety inspection and IBC, was of utmost importance as it would facilitate effective implementation of CFTs in Rwanda in accordance with best practices. There were twenty-nine (29) participants drawn from various organizations including REMA, Ministry of Environment, Rwanda Agriculture Board, Rwanda Food and Drugs Authority, University of Rwanda, Institute of Applied Sciences, and Rwanda Inspectorate, Competition and Consumer Protection Authority. Hands-on training on biosafety inspection and Institutional Biosafety Committee (IBC), delivered through Powerpoint

presentations, group break-out session / role plays – virtual inspection and plenary discussions, resulted in acquisition of basic requisite capacity in biosafety inspection and understanding of oversight role of IBCs in biosafety regulation.

The Director General of REMA, in her remarks, restated the government of Rwanda's immense gratitude for the support provided towards creating an enabling environment for safely harnessing modern biotechnology towards attaining improved food security and socio-economic development, and re-emphasized the political will and commitment from Rwanda government for the biosafety process. She, therefore, reiterated the need for continued support from AUDA-NEPAD to facilitate the enactment of a substantive biosafety law in order for the regulatory regime to attain its full functionality in Rwanda. AUDA-NEPAD is committed to providing further support to facilitate enactment of biosafety law and to strengthen institutional capacity in every aspect of the biosafety process, in order to ensure national competence, assuage public fears, and instill public confidence in the national regulatory system.