

Africa Biosafety Watch

ABNE NEWSLETTER (June-September, 2014)

A Message from the Director of ABNE

Colleagues and friends, yet another quarter has come to a successful end and I am pleased to share with you our interventions across Africa in this issue of our newsletter. You will agree with me that stakeholder participation in biosafety processes is an important step in ensuring transparency and national ownership. This calls for vigorous and sustained awareness creation among these identified stakeholders, particular the media, which happen to be the window through which many of the stakeholders obtain their information. We noted with great concern some inaccurate coverage on biosafety issues in some countries that are making progress. This has the tendency to influence stakeholders negatively. Thus, one of our efforts this quarter has been to sensitize selected stakeholder in some of our focus countries on biosafety. This was a two prong approach; first focusing on the media to stimulate fair and balance reportage on biosafety issues and to equip them with science-based information sources and subsequently focusing on selected stakeholder groups to correct some of these misinformation. The extent to which some of our media folks and other stakeholders have been misinformed is incredible and thus these sensitization campaigns need to be intensified.



We did also focus on our core mandate of building the capacity of our regulators this quarter. In an effort to ensure sustainability, we have been working to institutionalize biosafety capacity building within selected African universities.

You will recall that one such short-course was held at the Polytechnic University of Bobo-Dioulasso in Burkina Faso last year.

I am happy to report that the maiden short-course in East Africa was successfully implemented at Makerere University, Uganda this quarter. We hope to replicate this in the selected three African universities next year. We ask for your continued support and collaboration as we work together to ensure that biosafety regulatory regimes across Africa are truly functional.

It is my hope that you will enjoy reading this quarter's issue of our newsletter and we encourage you to send your comments, feedbacks and suggestions to us at abne@nepadbiosafety.net.

– Diran Makinde (Director, NEPAD Agency-ABNE)

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The second biosafety short course for African regulators takes place in Kampala

NEPAD Agency ABNE, in collaboration with Makerere University, Uganda and Michigan State University, organized a biosafety short course for African regulators in Kampala, Uganda, from 14 to 17 July 2014. Twenty-two regulators from Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe took part in this course. This was the second time ABNE organized such a high profile course in Africa after the one held at the Polytechnic University of Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, in November 2013.



From left to right are Prof/ Rebecca Grumet, Prof. John O Asibo, Prof. Diran Makinde and Prof. Bernard Bashaasha during the opening ceremony.



Group photo of part of participants

The short course was officially opened by Prof. John O. Asibo, Guest of honor and Chairperson of the National Biosafety Committee in Uganda, in the presence of Prof. Diran Makinde, ABNE Director, Prof. Bernard Bashaasha, Principal of Makerere University College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and Prof. Rebecca Grumet from Michigan State University.

In his statement, Prof. Asibo emphasized the importance for African countries to have reliable systems to monitor developments in biotechnology to ensure successes in health, food security, biodiversity and trade.

“There should be confidence in unanimous decision-making expertise guided by technical sub-committees and systems for the provision of information to and education of the public. We should have the capacity to evaluate our own status of knowledge, policies, implementation and application for the wellbeing of our people and the rest of the world”, he added.

23 topics were addressed and discussed during this short course which was an opportunity to keep participants abreast of the fundamental knowledge and the recent developments of biotechnology and biosafety in Africa and at the global level.

Presentations during the first day focused on agricultural biotechnology and biosafety while the second day emphasized environmental biosafety matters. The following day was dedicated to food and feed safety aspects and the last day focused on commercial release, socio-economics, biosafety communication, law and policy.

This short course was an opportunity for participants to share the lessons learnt in African countries with significant experience in agricultural biotechnology regulation such as Burkina Faso, Ghana, Uganda and Malawi. A field visit also allowed participants to see GM banana trials in the laboratory and confined field trials at Kawanda Research Center near Kampala.



Part of participants during the field visit at Kawanda

On the side of the short course, Prof. Diran Makinde, ABNE Director, paid a courtesy visit to the Uganda National Council for

Science and Technology (UNCST), host to the ABNE node in Uganda.

Prof. Makinde was welcomed by Dr. Maxwell Otim Onapa, Deputy Executive Secretary of UNCST. They both agreed on the need to strengthen collaboration between the two institutions to ensure safe use of modern biotechnology in Uganda and in the East African sub-region.

Comments from participants

Dr. Jonathan Mufandaedza, Registrar and Chief Executive Officer of the National Biosafety Authority of Zimbabwe.

“The Biosafety course is an important course for us, given that we are involved in biosafety and biotechnology issue back home. We have got quite a varied array of people who were coming to facilitate the course; it showed quite a lot of experience drawn from different African countries. However, we felt that adding one another voice would enrich the course much further.

As Zimbabwe, we really feel that NEPAD ABNE initiative is for Africans and for Zimbabwe as well. We wish to be involved in activities being supported by ABNE such as the training of trainers so that we constantly are in touch with our regulators and the players who are involved in the biosafety regulation in Zimbabwe”.



Mr. Thomas Bwana, Principal Agricultural Officer from the Department of Environment which is the National Biosafety Focal Point in Tanzania.

“This biosafety short course is good. It is like exposing the regulators to what is happening elsewhere and we had this opportunity of sharing experience with some other people who have been doing their confined field



trials in their countries and also these other who are starting. So the course was good.

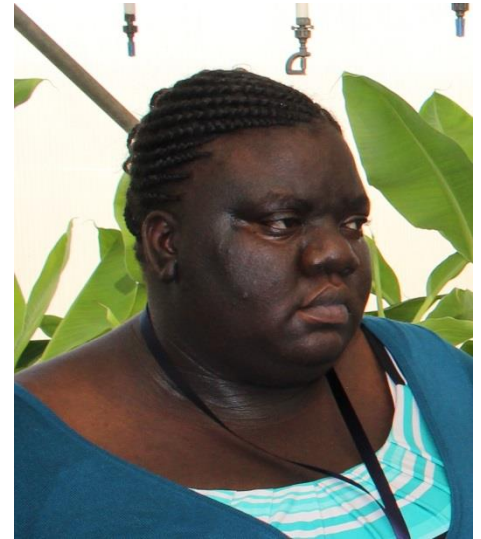
We are sure that this technology is very good but also there are some worries. And when we are back home, we are addressing those worries before making decisions.

I wish we spend more time on this portion where people could go in details and tell us the worries and the counter arguments against those worries”.

Dr. Wezi Mkwaila, Lecturer at the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources, she also serves as the part time Programme Officer for ABNE in Malawi.

“This course is quite a unique short course in that it is organized by Africans targeting African regulators. I think it is a success. I like the cross section of the participants, I also like the presentations in that they were all talking about the African context especially like the field visit where we saw GM bananas; that is an African crop being researched on by African scientists to solve an African problem.

I have learnt during this course to bring all people onboard. In our case, in Malawi, we have a National Biosafety Regulation Committee that is composed of all stakeholders and the key is to listen to all them and not dismiss them even if scientifically they may not be sound, but we need to answer to every issue case by case and also address every concern one by one”.



Ghana: media practitioners sensitized on biosafety



NEPAD Agency’s ABNE partnered with the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) and Ghana’s Crop Research Institute (CRI) to organize a biosafety awareness workshop in Kumasi, from 13 to 15 August 2014, for media practitioners. The workshop aimed to sensitize media practitioners from both the print and electronic media on issues of biotechnology and biosafety with the aim of ensuring accurate, fair and balanced reportage on this highly polarized subject in Ghana.

A number of topical issues were covered to give participants a broad overview of biotechnology and basic understanding of how it is regulated. In order to demystify the technology, participants were taken through hands-on laboratory sessions of DNA extraction.

26 media practitioners including journalist, TV and radio program hosts, editors, freelance bloggers *inter alia* from the middle – northern belt of Ghana were sensitized with factual science-based information and these were supported with web links to key information sources to facilitate a fair and balanced coverage



Participants at the CRI Biotech Center in Kumasi



Group work during the workshop

on issues of biotechnology and biosafety. These media practitioners were empowered to ensure that information on biotechnology and biosafety they pass to the general public are devoid of unsubstantiated claims and sensationalism.

Participants hailed the cordial atmosphere for dialogue with scientists and regulators. To bridge the information gap, it is essential to create a platform for the media, farmer groups, scientists and regulators/policy makers for regular interaction on this issue, to share knowledge and build networks.

MSU and NEPAD Agency ABNE join hands to enhance African capacity in agricultural biotechnology

The NEPAD Agency's African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) collaborated with Michigan State University (MSU) in the annual international agricultural biotechnology training program held at MSU from 7-19 September 2014. The program was attended by 34 participants from 22 countries in 4 continents (Africa, America, Asia and Europe). The group included individuals from diverse backgrounds and professions including a farmer, an extension officer, biosafety regulators, scientists, agricultural and breeding practitioners, environment specialists, and media specialists. Africa was represented by 10 participants from Angola, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Malawi, and South Africa.



A view of part of participants during a visit to MSU labs and greenhouses, with Prof. Karim Maredia (in the middle, foreground), Director of the World Technology Access Program at MSU

Among the topics covered in the training program were introduction to plant breeding and biotechnology, environmental and food safety issues, applications of biotechnology such as molecular tools to improve crop production such as drought tolerance, cold tolerance, and/or insect resistance, biotechnology regulation in the U.S., biotechnology in Europe, intellectual property management, biotechnology commercialization etc. Besides presentations, participants had the opportunity to participate in field visits to biotechnology laboratories and greenhouses at MSU, and to local farms cultivated with genetically engineered (GE) crops in Dansville, Michigan. During the farm visits, participants had an opportunity to interact with Michigan farmers and gain insight into constraints and opportunity in growing GE crops.

The training program also allowed participants to travel to St Louis in Missouri to visit the Danforth Plant Science Center which specializes in the development of GE crops for humanitarian purposes, especially drought-tolerant and virus-resistant crops to help alleviate hunger, malnutrition, and poverty around the world. In Saint Louis, participants had the opportunity to visit Monsanto's Research and Development facilities in Chesterfield and meet with representatives of the world's leading company in the development and commercialization of GE crops.

The group continued with a visit to Washington DC, where participants engaged in a question and answer session with a panel of industry and consumer group representatives. This was followed by another lively roundtable

discussion with U.S. biotechnology regulatory agency representatives.

The two week training program ended with sessions on biotechnology communications with general public as well as science and technology communication. Certificates were awarded to participants during a closing ceremony chaired by Mr. Mark Petry, Deputy Director, New Technologies Division/FAS, of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

African participants' testimonials

Ramosh Jiah, Deputy Director, Department of National Parks and Wildlife in Malawi:

“This training has been educative, informative; I have gained skills in biotechnology. Initially, I thought that biotechnology was harmful, but now I have got information. What I liked most was the way the instructors were presenting their materials, the videos, the expressions, and the way the course was arranged.”



John Dziwornu, Ghana National Association of Farmers and Fishermen (GNAFF):

“This course was very important for me in the sense that it has exposed me to what biotech is and to how progressive farmers in America are using it to feed the world. They are using the technology to increase productivity and to address climate change issues in farming. This short course has helped me to understand and to demystify biotechnology and the way people are talking about it. It is a practical thing and we in Africa, must not be left out.

I particularly like the practical talks and demonstrations we saw, especially the laboratories and the green houses, and experts' presentations on topical issues such as tissue culture, food safety etc. It has provided me with a lot of insights. I am very grateful to NEPAD ABNE for contributing to this program and I hope we can scale it up by increasing knowledge in Ghana so that more people understand what biotechnology and biosafety are.”



Hillary Kipngeno Sang: Corporate Communications Officer, National Biosafety Authority, Kenya:

« The Biosafety short course was indeed an eye-opener. It covered all the aspects of modern biotechnology including risk assessment, regulatory aspects, safety of biotech products and future prospects of the technology. I greatly thank ABNE for sponsoring me to attend this course because it gave me a good chance to blend my communications skills with genetic engineering (GE) information. I particularly liked the expertise of the trainers and the field visits. The diversity of the participants also gave a feel of what other people think about GE products.”

Bathobile Charmaine Mahlangu, Biosafety Officer, Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in South Africa:

“The short course has enhanced my knowledge and understanding on biotechnology. I have also realized that challenges to the use of biotechnology exist not only in my country but in other countries as well. I also got a better understanding on the US regulatory system.”



Sisay Garedeew, Director, Science and Technology Policy Research Directorate, Ministry of Science and Technology in Ethiopia.

It was a very interesting course and I learned a lot from it. I will try to convey what I have learned here to my colleagues and my country and definitely we will proceed in the good direction. I liked very much the seeing-is-believing tour. We learned a lot and the different presentations also helped me to understand biotechnology and biosafety.”

Cecilia Kaga-Agyemang, Director of Agriculture, Ministry of Food and Agriculture in Ghana:

“This short course was really appropriate because we have acquired so much information and scientific knowledge on biotechnology and biosafety. Before, we had very fragmented knowledge on these topics but the presenters brought together all the necessary updated information on biotechnology and biosafety.”



Gerald Simon Meke, Assistant Director of forestry, from the Forestry Institute of Malawi.

“This short course has been of great interest because apart from giving a theoretical background, we have been allowed to meet with people who matter in the industry: the developers of the technology, the people who apply the technology, and then the regulators. I was particularly interested in how regulators go about regulations and I have got the necessary information.”



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