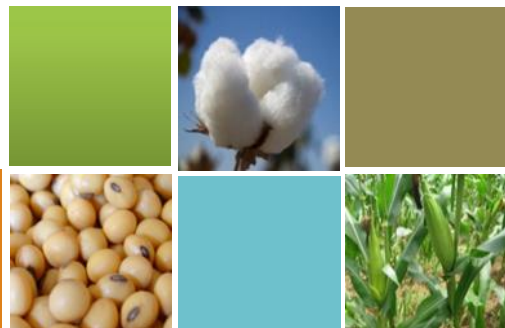




African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE)



Africa Biosafety Watch

ABNE NEWSLETTER (January – March, 2014)

A Message from the Director of ABNE

As usual with Q1, NEPAD Agency ABNE was fully engaged this quarter. Included among the key activities for Q1 are the organization of the annual meeting of the Technical Advisory and Management Committees in January at the ABNE premises in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The meetings focused on the ABNE work plans for 2014 and other management and financial issues. Following this was the biosafety coordination meeting that took place in Lilongwe, Malawi. The meeting considered key capacity building needs and emerging challenges regarding the development and implementation of workable regulatory frameworks; strengthening the alignment among biosafety service providers and stakeholders to build future collaborative efforts in biosafety capacity development; and identify action steps and responsibilities to move biotechnology and biosafety agenda forward in Africa.

In addition to these, we engaged selected West Africa regional biosafety regulators in March on training on food safety assessment of GM food/feed while a number of Ghanaian journalists were sensitized on biotechnology and biosafety issues. We provided capacity building support to Nigerian national and institutional biosafety committees to improve their knowledge and capacities on adequate decision making processes on biotechnology applications in the country. As the number of African countries moving forward towards the adoption of modern biotechnology is increasing, NEPAD Agency ABNE is in the forefront to bring the necessary technical assistance and support to make them comply with the national and international safety regulations.

Enjoy this edition!

Prof Diran Makinde (Director, NEPAD-ABNE)

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ABNE TAC held its annual meeting in Ouagadougou

NEPAD Agency ABNE hosted its 5th Technical Advisory Committee meeting in Ouagadougou from 23 – 24 January 2014. The meeting was chaired by Dr Dave Keetch from South Africa, who is currently the new chairman of ABNE’s TAC. Three other TAC members participated in the meeting, namely Dr Yaa Osei from Ghana, Prof.



Magdy Madkour from Egypt and Prof. Charudatta Mayee from India.

Due to various constraints, four other TAC members could not take part in this meeting. These include: Dr. Yona Baguma from Uganda, Mrs. Prudence Galega from Cameroon, Dr. Mahama Ouedraogo from the African Union Commission in Addis Ababa and Dr. Frank Fear from the Michigan State University, USA.

Also in attendance was Law-

rence Kent from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the entire ABNE Team.

The meeting was an annual event by the TAC to review the activities implemented by ABNE in the previous year (2013) and to adopt strategies and new workplans for 2014. The current implementation phase of the ABNE project ends in December 2014 and TAC members provided guidance and recommendations aimed at ensuring a greater impact of

the programme’s activities in the coming year.

In the year 2014, ABNE was advised to continue focusing on a few countries with more result-oriented activities. TAC also recommended that ABNE adopt an effective communication strategy to provide its audience, including farmer-based organizations and law and policy makers, with accurate biosafety information.

This was the first meeting of the new TAC members

following the two-terms of the previous TAC members which ended in December 2013. The current members are renowned university professors with vast biosafety and biotechnology expertise who are playing key

roles in their countries and abroad. It is believed that they will bring their wealth of experience to assist ABNE in providing African regulators with effective capacity building opportunities. This will help the regulators to

make informed choices and implement relevant biosafety legal frameworks such that African countries will be able to apply safe modern biotechnology to enhance agricultural productivity.

Quotes from two TAC meeting participants

Dr Dave Keetch, Chairman of ABNE Technical Advisory Committee

“Given the circumstances and given the resources that are at the disposal of ABNE, this network has developed very satisfactorily as a biosafety service provider, successfully focusing on the needs of African regulators and African countries.

I would like to see ABNE growing, not only in structure but also in extent, I would like to see more countries making use of the expertise that ABNE has at its disposal; ABNE’s biosafety efforts can increase not only the wheels of biosafety and biotechnology but also responsibility and it could use all the technology in Africa for the benefit of Africans.

I would encourage every African country to at least evaluate the technology for itself and not to be dictated by any third party. Each African country has its own set of challenges and problems and no country should be forced to adopt a path that it does not wish to follow. I think it would be very foolish to voluntarily decide not to go on a path just because you have heard bad things about it. You should evaluate for yourself and then on the basis of the information you generate you decide whether you are for it or against it.”



Lawrence Kent, Senior Program Officer at Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF)



“The BMGF is quite satisfied with the progress and development of ABNE as an institution; when this programme started 6 years ago, John Mugabe was then with NEPAD and he approached us with the idea of creating an African institution that could respond to the needs of African regulators for information and for training. It was just a concept, an idea at that point. And it was also a recommendation of the African Union’s High Level Panel on Biotechnology that such training and capacity building be made available to African regulators. Now it is something that has moved beyond the idea of concept and beyond the pilot stage to actually become a viable and important institution within NEPAD, as a programme of the African Union and I am proud that it has got a strong office and very strong staff and a very good reputation through their actions with regulators throughout the continent. So that is something we are proud of.

The contribution that ABNE has made, for example, for Ghana in helping Ghana develop its regulatory system in a way that is appropriate for biotech crops; the system has developed to the point that the country is moving forward with confined field trials of GM crops. I think one of the best way for Africans to decide

whether or not they want to use this technology is by giving a chance to see it for themselves and when field trials are designed in a way that is safe, it provides opportunity for the people to get hands-on experience and then decide for themselves whether or not they want to move forward with the technology. So in general, we are proud of ABNE. There are other examples and Ghana is just one of them.”

ABNE TAC and staff members to pay a courtesy call on the Minister of Scientific Research and Innovation in Burkina Faso



From left to right are Dr Dave Keeth, Prof Diran Makinde, and Hon. Minister Isaie Gnissa Konate.

The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and staff members of NEPAD Agency's ABNE, paid a courtesy call on Hon. Isaie Gnissa Konaté, Minister of Scientific Research and Innovation in Burkina Faso on January 22, 2014. TAC members are selected from each 5 African sub-region, the African Union and two outside members from the USA and India. Hon. Minister Konaté welcomed ABNE TAC and staff members and stated that "ABNE is a very important institution for Africa and Burkina Faso, because it provides advisory services to African countries to

help them use biotechnology in the best and safest way." He noted that if the African continent wants to succeed in producing enough food for its populace, it must harness biotechnology tools. He said "Biotechnology, in its broader sense, including but not limited to genetically modified products, can help produce enough food for people and also feed the surplus to our livestock. He added that "ABNE helps policy makers make informed choices on the biotech agenda as to what they think will be the most beneficial to them and we are very grateful for that." Hon. Minister especially thanked ABNE for

the opportunity given to him to participate together with Ministers from other African countries in a study tour to India in October last year. He indicated that he was already reaping positive outcomes from this tour in terms of possibilities to test new varieties.

Dr Dave Keetch, TAC Chairman, thanked the Hon. Minister for his hospitality and assured him that ABNE will continue to bring technical assistance for Africa's prosperity. "We are happy to be part of the process of helping African countries to feed themselves", he said.

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Group photo with Hon. Minister Konate.

Study tour to Bt cotton farms in Burkina Faso

A "seeing is believing" tour organized by NEPAD Agency ABNE and its Partners for Regulators, Decision and Policy Makers from West African francophone countries

NEPAD Agency-ABNE in partnership with OFAB-Burkina established by African Agriculture, Technology Foundation (AATF) and INERA, organized a study tour to Bt cotton smallholder farms in and around-Bobo Dioulasso – Burkina Faso from 12 –

15 December 2013.

23 participants including farmers, government officials, MPs, textile industry representatives from Benin, Togo and Burkina Faso and the Minister of Scientific Research and Innovation of Burkina Faso participated in the fact-finding tour.

The study tour aimed, on one hand, to allow West African policymakers to witness first-hand the progress made by Burkina Faso especially concern-

ing the cotton industry, and on the other hand to share experience on biotechnology and biosafety issues in the region. The tour was preceded by a one-day seminar on the basics of biotechnology and its regulation in the African context.

The seminar was moderated by Prof. Gnissa Isaïe Konaté, the Honourable Minister of Scientific Research and Innovation of Burkina Faso and covered an number of topics including

biosafety challenges and opportunities in Africa, and legal and policy issues including the need for regulatory harmonization of biosafety legislation in the West African sub-region. Others include the outcomes and perspectives of the research on transgenic cotton in Burkina Faso and lessons learnt from growing and marketing transgenic cotton – CGM Bollgard II – in Burkina Faso.

The field visit allowed participants to see Bt cotton fields and also conventional cotton fields that were being harvested and to directly interact with farmers to have a better understanding of the benefits, potential risks and other issues faced in growing each type of cotton. The Bt Cotton farmers

expressed satisfaction with the cultivation of this engineered cash crop noting that it has considerably reduced their workload, especially with respect to spraying their fields. They noted that with Bt cotton, chemical insecticides are used only twice throughout the growing season while with the conventional cotton it needs to be sprayed six to eight times. “I will never give up with Bt cotton”, insisted Philippe Tamini from Ouarkoye community. **“If our country was to stop growing this type of cotton, I would simply stop growing cotton because I would no longer be able to go through all the hassle of treating conventional cotton eight times every season and undermine my health”.**

The only difficulty farmers say they encounter with Bt cotton is the cost of seeds. They wish that the government of Burkina Faso will subsidize the price to reduce this cost and improve access to Bt cotton seeds.

At the end of the tour, participants, especially those from Benin and Togo were grateful for the opportunity to witness first-hand the success of



A view of participants during the field visit

biotech regulation and commercialization in Burkina Faso and to learn from this experience. “We are sometimes stranded because we lack critical information”, said Hon. DOBOU Kwadjo Sédem, MP from Togo. “With all the information we have gotten from here, we will be able to explain things to our colleagues and counterparts to allow them to take the right decisions”.

Burkina Faso is the leading country on biotechnology and biosafety matters in West Africa. This study tour will certainly help other countries in the sub-region to share in the experience of Burkina and to implement effective biosafety systems to safely harness the potentials of biotechnology for socio-economic development of the sub-region.



From left to right are Dr Moussa Savadogo of NEPAD/ABNE, Hon. Minister, Prof. Gnissa Isaïe Konaté and a technology developer, Dr Doulaye Traoré.

ABNE Director and staff pay a courtesy call on the President of the University of Ouagadougou

On January 8 2014, Prof. Diran Makinde, Director of ABNE, accompanied by some of his staff, paid a visit to the President of the University of Ouagadougou, Prof. Karifa Bayo in his office.

Prof. Makinde thanked the University of Ouagadougou for hosting the ABNE node in Burkina Faso for more than 3 years now.

The President of the University welcomed the ABNE team and wished them the best for the New Year. He said it is his expectation that, through this visit, the relationship between the University and ABNE become stronger and more institutional, to the benefit of both parties. He suggested that ABNE holds a seminar whereby the faculty and staff of the University of Ouagadougou can learn more on ABNE’s role and missions. This will help build a sustainable platform for interaction and cooperation between the two institutions, especially in the biotechnology and biosafety areas.

Prof. Makinde approved this idea and assured that ABNE will follow this up closely.



From left to right are Dr. Moussa Savadogo, Mr. Samuel Timpo, Prof. Karifa Bayo, Prof. Diran Makinde, Dr. Woldeyus Si-nebo and Jean Keberé

Improving competence of regulators for food/feed safety assessment in Africa

NEPAD-ABNE collaborated with partner biosafety service providers to organize a biosafety workshop focusing on food/feed safety assessment of GM crops from 10 – 14 March, 2014 in Accra, Ghana.

This workshop saw a gathering of thirty six (36) biosafety regulators from eight (8) African countries namely, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Malawi.

The main goal of the workshop was to expose regulators and decision makers in the African sub-region to the food safety considerations for the general release of GMOs for Food, Feed or Processing (GMOs-FFPs) and to build their capacity for effective, efficient and a harmonized decision making on issues of food safety of GM foods/feed.

Through such training sessions, ABNE hopes to promote science-based food and feed safety assessment and decision making for GMOs, and to assist countries to establish processes for handling applications for GMOs-FFPs. ABNE also hopes to contribute to building a critical mass of regu-

lators, decision makers and scientific advisors and to create a platform for interaction among food and feed safety regulators in the sub-region

that will facilitate the likelihood of porting food safety risk assessment data/reports and decisions.

The workshop included a series of presentations interspersed with group breakout working sessions and plenary/report back sessions. Participants had practical hands-on experience evaluating data extracts from real dossiers. Six broad sections of food safety were covered including; the basic principles food safety and the process of conducting a food safety assessment for biotech foods including, description of donor, recipient organisms and genetic modification, compositional data analysis, charac-



A view of workshop participants

terization of genetic modification and safety assessment of expressed substances. This was followed by a section on the application of problem formulation to food/feed risk assessment and risk assessment report writing. The last section was dedicated to issues of harmonisation and mutual recognition of Food/Feed Safety data evaluations.

Topics were handled by experienced resource persons with considerable years of experience and expertise in this area, including Florida Carino from the University of Philippines, Monica Garcia Alonzo from Estel Consult, UK, Micheal Watch from the Center for Safety Assessment of Food and Feed (CSAFF) of the *International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI)* and Richard Goodman from the University of Nebraska.

This training was an essential initial step at building a critical mass of technical experts with competence in food/feed safety issues to support biosafety decision makers. More training will be required in this area in order to further enhance the competence and confidence of African regulators to review any dossier for commercial release of GMOs especially for food/feed and processing.



News in brief

Media sensitization in Ghana

On March 7, 2014, the Biotechnology and Nuclear Agriculture Research Institute (BNARI) of the Ghana Atomic Energy Commission together with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and in partnership with the African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE), the Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB) and the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) organized a one-day sensitization workshop targeting key journalists and media personnel in Ghana.

The goal of this one-day training was to empower identified opinion leaders in the media by deepening their knowledge of biotechnology and biosafety as part of efforts to minimize public misinformation and falsehood by anti-biotech activists.

20 journalists from the print and electronic media representing 10 media houses took part in this workshop.

Topics addressed included an introduction to biotechnology and genetic modification, and safety of GM foods. A lot of time was allotted for the media to enable them ask pertinent questions and obtain answers from the resource persons.

The meeting was useful in presenting the facts to the journalists who serve as conduits and whose media houses mostly serve as a platform used by anti-biotech activist to spread misinformation and peddle falsehood in the country.

Biosafety coordination meeting in Malawi

NEPAD Agency ABNE organized on March 15, 2014, its annual biosafety coordination meeting in Lilongwe, Malawi.

The main objective of this meeting was to bring together leading biotechnology and biosafety stakeholders, and providers of technical assistance, to share experiences and analyze the key capacity building needs and emerging challenges regarding the development and implementation of workable regulatory frameworks.

Some of the key observations from the meeting include the necessity to re-examine the criteria for choosing focus countries and to add a few more countries without losing sight of the need to focus on a few countries to maximize impact; the meeting was very focused on practical goals and action steps necessary to achieve these goals; collaboration among the various partners and stakeholders has improved tremendously over the years as a result of this coordination effort. Partners and stakeholders are no longer competing amongst themselves but rather leveraging on their individual strengths to collectively achieve common goals in focus countries; ABNE was called to increase its support to the southern Africa countries and to Uganda.

Partners also observed that biosafety capacity building efforts may be more effective at the country level than at the regional level. That said, it is crucial to monitor developments in the regional economic communities and provide the necessary support to ensure workable regulations are adopted.

Upcoming Events

June-July 2014: JTF validation focus group meetings in study countries; South Africa, Mozambique, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Burkina Faso

June 4-11, 2014: Biosafety regulatory study tour to South Africa.

July 14-18, 2014: Biosafety short course at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda.

July 2014: Training workshop on the key regulatory considerations for confined field trials in Bamako, Mali.



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