



Africa Biosafety Watch ABNE NEWSLETTER (April-June, 2014)

A Message from the Director of ABNE

The African Union has declared 2014 to be the Year of Agriculture and Food Security in Africa, marking 10th Anniversary of the adoption of the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program, known as CAADP. More recently, the Africa Union's commitment to agriculture has again played out during their 23rd summit June 20-27, with the theme: "Agriculture and Food Security in Africa. The African Union summit concluded that agriculture can deliver economic growth but access to funding, infrastructure improvements and a change in the perception of risk are required.

More and more requests for support keep coming from African countries willing to harness biotechnology in the safest way to improve their food security but are still blocked through lack of adequate regulatory framework. During the second quarter of 2014, NEPAD Agency ABNE has shifted gears to strengthen the capacities of a number of African countries in regulatory handling of modern biotechnology tools. Malawi, Nigeria, Togo and Ghana were among the countries supported during this period as reported in this edition.

As per its mandate, NEPAD Agency ABNE will continue to extend its support to AU member states with the political will to develop workable biosafety regulatory framework.

– Diran Makinde (Director, NEPAD-ABNE)

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Supporting Malawi in overall regulatory handling of Bt cotton multi-location trials

NEPAD Agency's ABNE, in collaboration with Malawi's Environmental Affairs Department (EAD) of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Management organized training, from 17-18 March 2014, for the members of Malawi's National Biosafety Regulatory Committee (NBRC) in overall regulatory handling of Bt cotton multi-location trials with a view to general release.



Thus twenty-four regulators from Malawian national biosafety regulatory body received valuable training on biosafety administration and regulatory handling of GM crop multi-location trials (applications, inspection and compliance monitoring). Importantly, the regulators were able to receive first-hand regulatory experiences of Bt cotton multi-location trials from Ghana and Bt cotton multi-location testing and commercialization in Burkina Faso. The regulators also acquired valuable insights on what to expect as they look forward to handling possible applications for general release of Bt cotton in Malawi.

For the technical biosafety capacity of the country to be complete, NEPAD ABNE donated technical assistance items to the national biosafety office at the EAD.

The technical assistance items, including two laptop computers, a desktop computer, a multi-purpose printer, a UPS, two executive desks, two swivel chairs and two filing cabinets were handed over to Dr. Aloysius Kamperewera, Director of the EAD.

Malawi is conducting multi-location testing of Bt cotton with a view to commercialization sooner or later. The country has gained some significant experience on wide

scale testing of a GM crop. Moving beyond this stage towards commercial production requires a closer engagement and regulatory support for the country to make economic benefit from investments made so far. NEPAD ABNE is committed to helping Malawi and all African countries safely harness biotechnology tools to improve small-scale agriculture and boost socioeconomic development across the continent.

Strengthening regulatory capacity of Institutional Biosafety Committees in Nigeria

The NEPAD Agency's African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE), at the request of the Competent National Authority (the Federal Ministry of Environment), and in partnership with the IFPRI's Program for Biosafety Systems, organized a training from April 1 – 3, 2014 to strengthen regulatory capacity of Institutional Biosafety Committees (IBCs) in Abuja, Nigeria. In all, 44 participants drawn from government ministries, regulatory agencies, universities, and research institutions attended this training. The training was facilitated by Samuel Timpo, ABNE's Senior Programme Officer on socio-economic aspects of biosafety and Godwin Lemgo, ABNE's Food Safety Programme Officer. They were assisted by Mr. Raheef Ademola Usman, Head of the Biosafety Office within the Federal Ministry of Environment, Mr. Rufus E. Ebegba, Deputy Director of the Biosafety Unit and also the National Biosafety Focal Point for Nigeria, Mrs. Oluwagbeminiyi Olajitan Popoola, Head of the Legal Department of the National Biotechnology Development Agency (NABDA) and Dr Olalekan Akinbo, ABNE's country coordinator.



A view of the workshop participants

The main objective of the training was to empower regulators serving as members of IBCs by strengthening their knowledge and competencies to empower regulators serving as members of IBCs by strengthening their knowledge and competencies regarding their roles and responsibilities so as to enable them adequately carry out mandated biosafety functions.

Topics addressed included an overview of biotechnology, genetic modification, biosafety and best practices in Research and Development (R&D), an update on status of biotechnology and biosafety in Nigeria, domestic legal mandate for IBCs, regulations on import and export of GMOs, differences between contained use and confined use, general release, public communication about biotechnology and biosafety, ethical considerations in monitoring compliance, summary of IBC roles and responsibilities, IBC certification process.

Clearly, this training was important in ensuring continued regulatory compliance for ongoing confined field trials and multi-location trials for Maruca-resistant cowpea and bio-fortified sorghum.

Comments from participants



Mr. Raheef Ademola Usman, Head of the Biosafety Office within the Federal Ministry of Environment

“This workshop was very timely because until now, only 3 institutions were actively engaging in modern biotechnology activities. Now with participants having been drawn from various agro-ecological zones of Nigeria, there is adequate representation and reaching out to other stakeholders even at the grassroots. In addition some of our participants were coming for the first time and from their feedback, the training has been a wonderful experience.

Clearly, they have understood the relevance of IBCs and their role within the regulatory system. We asked for representation from stakeholder institutions so that each representative will get back to their institution and educate other members on the need for IBCs and their contribution towards further enhancing research and productivity.”

Mr. Rufus E. Ebegba, Deputy Director of the Biosafety Unit and also National Biosafety Focal Point for Nigeria

“The workshop was excellent and useful because Nigeria is an evolving country with regards to biosafety and this is an emerging area in the country and information and skills gaps remain to be filled. This training was very useful as it enhanced our competencies in biosafety and also improved our skills, especially at the institutional biosafety level. It was beneficial not only for the IBC members but also for the staff of the national biosafety unit for them to know their responsibilities in line with the IBC.

We still need to extend this training to other institutions yet to be reached. We

also urge ABNE to continue with its support to Nigeria to ensure there is a biosafety law in the country. A biosafety law is very crucial; after all these training sessions if there is no law, there is no way we can put this knowledge to use. And we will not be able to use the technology for a national economic interest. ABNE is already helping towards this but we still need their help.”



Mrs. Oluwagbeminiyi Olajitan Popoola. Head Legal for the National Biotechnology Development Agency (NABDA)

“All the topics addressed during the workshop were interesting including the review of what the technology is through gene construct and genetic engineering, the whole procedure through to the consumers. The role of IBCs in contained use and confined field trials (CFT) and the socio-economic aspects ... all these were useful. I did a presentation on the legal aspects and I have received feedback from people saying it has opened their eyes to what they need to do for them to be compliant with the legal requirements.



I would suggest decentralizing this kind of training to other regions, to allow more people from these regions to participate because there is a need for more awareness on biosafety. There are so many regions in Nigeria with such institutes and universities that carry out research and a lot of them do not even know the biosafety measures and what exactly biosafety is.”



Dr. Mojisola Olayinka Edema, Associate Professor of Food microbiology and Facilitator of the IBC at the Federal University of Technology, Akure

“I think this workshop was very informative and it adds value to what we do. For me what was the most important was the communication of biosafety issues. As scientists, we have difficulties in being able to communicate effectively. Also it was important to know where to get biosafety resources from.”

Prof. Benjamin Ubi, Head of Department of Biotechnology, and Chairman of the Institutional Biosafety Committee at Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki.



“Nigeria is awaiting the passage a biosafety bill into law but at the same time we have to make every effort to ensure compliance to regulations that govern the conduct of biotech.

I feel very happy with the organization of this workshop, the caliber of participants is very good and also I very much appreciate the presenters and the lectures. I particularly liked the guidelines and the checklist to govern biosafety activities from laboratory and the stage of containment to confined field trials and then general

release. And also guidelines, with respect to the import or export of GM products, are important. With these guidelines at our disposal, we can easily apply them to our work in our institutions.

When I get back, I will meet with the Director of the biotech center and relate to him the outcome of this workshop and the next step for us to move forward.”

ABNE conducts stakeholders’ consultative workshop on the revised Togo biosafety law

Togo’s Ministry of Environment and Forest resources with the support of NEPAD Agency – ABNE organized a stakeholders’ consultative workshop to validate the Togo revised biosafety law from April 28 – May 2, 2014 in Lomé. Around 60 participants including government officials, researchers, lawyers, biosafety regulators, and civil society representatives took part in this workshop. The meeting was chaired by Mrs Marie Luce Mensah/Quashie, member of the National Biosafety Committee.



The revised draft law was prepared by a national consultant as it was recommended by the technical meeting organised in partnership with NEPAD-ABNE in Kpalime in 2012. His role was to propose how Togo could improve its biosafety law signed in January 2009 in order to ensure a better alignment with the international biosafety regulations and best practices, especially the Nagoya



Dr Moussa Savadogo (on left) discussing with Hon. Andre Johnson

Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress that Togo signed in September 2011. This validation workshop was a critical step before the new bill is tabled at the National Assembly for adoption before the end of this year. After a series of introductory presentations and discussions on Nagoya Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress and on the revised biosafety law, participants were given the opportunity to provide their inputs to the draft document through group work.

ABNE representatives seized the opportunity of their visit in Togo to meet Hon. André Johnson, Minister of Environment and Forest Resources and, responsible for the implementation of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in the country. Information documents on ABNE were given to the Honourable Minister on this occasion.

Comments from participants

Dr. Kossi Kpemoua, phytopathologist, in charge of phytopathology and biotechnology research issues at ITRA, Togolese institute of agricultural research and currently the Director of the Centre for agricultural research in dry savannah of ITRA



“We realized that in fact biotechnology is a tool and this tool is for us to use or not use according to its importance. It is interesting to see that all participants have a level of understanding of modern biotechnology and biosafety that has evolved. I really wish that this kind of information sharing can continue so that the Togolese people can have the same level of understanding and be able to share innovative ideas. The people that will benefit from the future technologies need to really understand what they want. They will need to express their needs and scientists will translate these needs into technology and decision makers will make sure this done in the safest way.

The NEPAD Agency ABNE has played a very important role in this area. We appreciate the support they provide us with, both technically and materially, and we believe that their work in Togo will yield substantial benefits. I hope that our policymakers can encourage ABNE to collaborate more with biosafety regulators in Togo. While ABNE network provides support, my wish is that our policymakers should take that support and perpetuate it and say that as ABNE helped the country do this or that, and the country must continue on its own before any additional support is secured”.

Mrs Amah Atutonu, responsible for protected areas at the wildlife and hunting division, and focal point of the Centre for biosafety information.

“I am very satisfied with this meeting, especially looking at the impressive number of participants. This once again demonstrates stakeholders’ interest in biosafety issues and the implementation of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in Togo. Discussions are going well too, and participants seek to understand.

As you know, the issue of biosafety is a very complex and sensitive subject. So people really seek to clearly understand, because we are here to make decisions that will engage the entire Togolese nation. It is now or never to make the right decisions that will guide us in the future in the management of biotechnology issues in Togo.”



NEPAD/ABNE pays a courtesy visit to the Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation of Ghana

A team from NEPAD's African Biosafety Network of Expertise, led by Prof Diran Makinde, paid a courtesy visit to the Competent National Authority for biosafety in Ghana i.e. the Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) where they met with Technocrats (the Chief Director and his team) and then Dr Musheibu Mohammed-Alfa, Deputy Minister.

Among the discussion points were;

- to highlight NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency's mandate and key outcomes of collaborations with MESTI since 2010 and re-affirm our commitment to assisting Ghana build a functional biosafety system for the regulation of agricultural biotechnology
- to discuss any challenges currently faced by MESTI in administering biosafety in Ghana and identify areas for technical and logistical support
- to discuss areas of possible collaborations during the next phase of implementation of ABNE activities

Prof. Makinde on behalf of the NEPAD Agency's Chief Executive Officer, Dr. Ibrahim Mayaki, thanked the Government of Ghana for the excellent progress the



Prof Diran Makinde and Dr Musheibu Mohammed-Alfa during the courtesy visit

country was making in building a robust and functional regulatory system for ensuring that the potentials of the technology are safely harnessed. He pledged NEPAD/ABNE's continued support to Ghana in ensuring the biosafety regulatory system reaches full functionality.

The Hon. Deputy Minister thanked NEPAD/ABNE for the constant support received since 2010 through various capacity building activities including training workshops, short courses, regulatory study tours, biosafety internships, sponsorship to international meetings and equipment support for biosafety administration. He stressed government's commitment to creating an enabling environment for the safe management of biotechnology.

Capacity of African regulators and policy makers strengthened through regulatory study tour in South Africa

The African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE), under the auspices of the NEPAD Planning and Coordinating Agency (NPCA) and in partnership with the Southern Africa Network for Biosciences (SANBio), organized a regulatory study tour to South Africa from June 4 – 11, 2014.

Ten regulators and policy makers from Burkina Faso,

Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe participated in this study tour.

The main objective of the study tour was to provide opportunities for African regulators and policy makers that are developing and setting up regulatory systems to directly interact with their peers and industry practitioners in South Africa.



Participants following a demonstration on one of the cutting-edge digital gene microscope in the world, at ARC-Biotechnology Platform in Pretoria



Mr. Neil de Smidt, Director of the the Buhle Farmers' Academy (on right) discussing with study tour participants

The agenda of this study tour included presentations, discussions, and visits to farms and stakeholder institutions. Topics discussed included current and future trends in agricultural biotechnology and biosafety in Africa, lessons learnt from implementing biosafety regulations in South Africa, and South Africa's experience with commercial release of GMO food and feed products.

Institutions and research centers visited included the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Forestry and Agricultural Biotechnology Institute (FABI), the Biotechnology Platform of the Agricultural Research Council (ARC), the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA), and the Buhle Farmers' Academy.

Participants also had the opportunity to visit GMO farms and to discuss the impacts of GM crops with farmers. According to Mr. Motlatsi Musi from the Olifantsvlei area, who has been growing GM maize for many years, he clearly observed significant increases in yield

following adoption of the technology. He mentioned that he was looking forward to growing crops with traits such as drought-tolerant maize stating "I will be able to better cope with the frequent droughts that have been undermining my efforts till now". On the benefits of growing GM maize, he stated "From my farm profits, I have been able to give quality education to my children and I feel healthier today because I no longer need to use as much pesticide as before".



GM maize producer Mr. Motlatsi Musi explaining the impacts and benefits of growing GM products

Comments from participants



“This study tour has been very good. We have learnt a lot about South African GMO regulatory systems. We are able to compare what South Africa is doing to what our own countries are doing so that when we go back, we shall be able to suggest new aspects of doing regulations”.

Prof Theophilus Mutui, from the National Biosafety Authority in Kenya

“The tour had a good balance as it provided the opportunity to go to the farmers’ fields, visit institutions, and listen to various stakeholders who are involved in the regulation of biotechnology and as well as enable us have face-to-face interactions with regulators. It really helped me to gain in knowledge and also obtain answers to some pertinent questions.”

Annah Runesu Takombwa, from the National Biotechnology Authority in Zimbabwe



“I observed that regulators and researchers in South Africa work in an enabling environment. Of interest to us in Burkina Faso is the possibility of partnering with South African institutions in terms of capacity building and information sharing on biosafety and biotechnology”.

Rodrigue Ouedraogo, Environmentalist and Biosafety Inspector at the National Biosafety Agency in BF



“Coming from the Ministry of Science and Technology of Mozambique, I found out as a matter of interest, the need to strengthen our collaboration with the Department of Science and Technology of South Africa as well as the Technology Innovation Agency.”

Laurinda Macamo, from the Ministry of Science and Technology in Mozambique



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