



Africa Biosafety Watch

ABNE NEWSLETTER (October-December, 2014)

A Message from the Director of ABNE

Partners and friends in biosafety regulation and policy making in Africa, I bring you warm greetings from harmattan-laden Ouagadougou. It is fulfilling to note that, despite sustained misinformation campaigns across the continent, our collective and consolidated efforts at ensuring sound and effective regulatory regimes for the safe management of biotechnology across Africa, based on science, is on course and gaining thrust. Tangible progress can be seen across the continent such as in the Republic of Benin where the moratorium has been lifted and efforts are underway to move forward, in Mozambique where biosafety decree was revised and accepted by the cabinet and the

Togo where the biosafety law is actively being revised; in Ethiopia where there is renewed momentum towards building a functional regulatory system; in Ghana where the regulatory system has been empowered and is currently processing applications and monitoring on-going trials *inter alia* and in Nigeria and Uganda where frantic efforts are underway to pass their biosafety bills.

It is our conviction that our efforts will eventually culminate in economic empowerment for our farmers and in food security for the continent; a conviction shared by **H.E Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma**, the African Union Commission Chairperson who believes that *“Africa’s capacity to feed itself now and in the future requires increasing investments in climate change research, biotechnology research and development, and innovation”*. This promise feeds into our passion and drive to continue supporting our stakeholders. Mindful of the fact that capacity building can be a slow and lengthy process, we find strength in our conviction that our dear continent should never again be left out of the benefits of an emerging technological innovation just because it lacks the capacity to regulate it. And for this, we are prepared



to double our efforts ***to ensure that any African nation that wishes to harness the enormous potential of biotechnology safely has adequate regulatory capacity to do so.***

In this Issue

- ❖ Building the capacity of Ethiopian stakeholders to implement a functional biosafety system
- ❖ NEPAD Agency ABNE’s TAC held its sixth annual meeting in Cape Town
- ❖ HE Jean-Baptiste Natama from the AU paid a visit to NEPAD Agency ABNE

It has indeed been a fulfilling first phase of our intervention in Africa. As we bring this phase of our project to a successful end in December this year, we wish to sincerely thank you for your cooperation, collaboration and unprecedented support. Within these few years of our operations, ABNE has become a household name amongst you and we are grateful for the overwhelming trust you bestowed on us. We are mindful of the fact that we were unable to meet all of your demands. We assure you that this is not intentional but informed by resource limitations. The challenge ahead of us will require continued support and collaboration and more importantly, greater commitment of financial and non-financial resources from all stakeholders including national governments. This will greatly enhance the sustainability of our service delivery to you our esteemed stakeholders. Here’s wishing you all season’s greetings and we look forward to working with you in our Phase II commencing in January 2015.

– **Diran Makinde (Director, NEPAD Agency-ABNE)**

Building the capacity of Ethiopian stakeholders to implement a functional administrative biosafety system



A view of participants during the workshop

NEPAD Agency ABNE in collaboration with the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR) and the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF) organized a training workshop on basics of building a functional biosafety system in Ethiopia at Ambassador Hotel in Addis Ababa from 8 to 10 October 2014. Seventy participants from diverse institutions including the House of Peoples Representatives (Parliament), private investors in agriculture, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (national biosafety focal point), Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Agriculture, agricultural research institutes and centers, universities, Seed Agency, Cotton Producers Association and Textile Industry Development Institute attended this training workshop.

Ethiopia ratified the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2003 and issued its Biosafety Proclamation in 2009. However, some provisions in the Proclamation were found to be too restrictive to allow the testing and possible release of GM crop varieties to spearhead agricultural development

while keeping potential risks to the environment and human health to the minimum. Taking note of this limitation, the government has authorized the revision of its Biosafety Proclamation to make it workable. Indeed, the revised Biosafety Proclamation has already been approved by the Council of Ministers and is only awaiting final reading and assent at the House of Peoples Representatives. The main objective of this workshop was to provide Ethiopian stakeholders with information necessary for implementing a functional biosafety system in the country.

“Without supporting the economic sector with modern science and technology, it will be hard to realize a competitive, responsive and fast growing economy, to meet the demand of a the growing population and catch up with the global development”, said Dr. Fentahun Mengistu, Director General of the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR). “We cannot be copycats forever and relying on external sources as a major supply of our scientific capital.

Ethiopia needs to strive to harness the power of science to increase its productivity.”

Topics addressed in the training workshop included an introduction to modern bio-economy; overview of opportunities and concerns about GM crops; the importance of building a functional biosafety system; elements of a functional biosafety administration; biosafety application handling; evaluation and decision making for CFT; standard operating procedures in biosafety approval; consumer acceptance of biotech crops and products; principles of environmental risk assessment and management for GM crops; principles of GM food safety assessment; socio-economic considerations in biosafety; overview of comparative analysis of major biosafety regulatory systems; and biosafety communication and awareness creation.



From left to right are: Dr. Woldeysus Sinebo from ABNE, Dr. Fantahun Mengistu from EIAR and Mr Samuel Timpo from ABNE during the opening ceremony.

This 3-day workshop was an opportunity for all participants to ask questions and interact with presenters on various areas of interest. The participants indicated that the training workshop has helped them enhance their capacity at this critical time when the country is seriously considering the testing and adoption of GM crops to boost agricultural productivity and production.

Participants' feedback on the workshop



H. E. Mr. Etefa Daba, Member of the Ethiopian House of Peoples Representatives

This was a very interesting workshop. Biotechnology is a new area for us, and it needs a lot of clarifications on its advantages and risks and if a country adopts it without knowing the advantages and the disadvantages, after implementation, it can be difficult. “Our country has not yet adopted this technology. We are on the way to adopt Bt cotton in the future. The Parliament will soon deliberate on the revised Biosafety Proclamation of 2009 to reflect positive experiences from outside, especially from the USA and African countries. I particularly like the Burkina Faso experience. They

adopted Bt cotton based on farmers' interests and needs. It was a demand-driven technology adoption and this is very good. Our demand in cotton is very huge. We are about to implement a big textile industry. That industry needs a lot of cotton and our production is very small. We are importing cotton from Sudan and from different countries. And this is very expensive for the country.

Mr. Haddish Girmai, Luci Agricultural Dev Plc

Our company produces mainly cotton and also banana and some fruits in the northern and southern parts of the country. This workshop was very impressive for me. There are a lot of rumors and misinformation and misunderstanding and from this workshop, I really understand what biotechnology and biosafety are about. I liked the presentations on the regulatory systems because I know that biosafety regulations are a bit tight in my country for many reasons such as biodiversity issues and many other factors. This was not a workable environment for scientists. The government is also aware of this and they are reviewing their policy.



Miss Zeritu Shashego, Awassa Agricultural Research Center

This training workshop was very important for us because we have shared different ideas and experience from different professional backgrounds. The training helped us to get important information on biotechnology and biosafety. Modern agricultural biotechnology is an important tool for economic development in developing countries like Ethiopia. My work is on post-harvest technology, so I particularly liked the discussions on the food safety aspects.

Dr. Firew Mekbib, Professor of Plant Biotechnology at Haramaya University

I have been teaching and carrying out research for the last 2 decades. We are now in a critical stage where the government wants to move towards biotechnology and we don't have a strong biosafety system. So this workshop was very critical and I am happy to be part of it as a participant and as a resource person. There are different approaches and NEPAD has very good experience in Africa. So, we are happy to have NEPAD's support on how to institutionalize biosafety in Ethiopia.



Dr. Beyene Demtsu Tessema, Plant Tissue Culture Specialist at Tigray Agricultural Research Institute

This workshop came at a right time when the country needs to harvest the benefits of biotech especially in the cotton area. It was very important to talk about biotechnology because there was a time when there was no agenda on biotech. Now everybody is talking about positive things concerning biotech. All stakeholders are involved in this workshop and it will be important to have a biotechnology strategy document and to have a good working environment on biotechnology.

Dr. Tesfaye Letta, Research Director, Sinana Agricultural Research Center



The workshop was really very relevant for Ethiopia that now understands the advantages of biotechnology. This workshop laid the foundation of how to safely use biotechnology. We have a proclamation on biosafety but now it is being revised and this training has provided us all the information we needed to know to effectively move forward. So the workshop was very timely for us.

NEPAD Agency ABNE's TAC held its sixth annual meeting in Cape Town

The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of NEPAD Agency ABNE held its sixth annual meeting on 14 November, 2014, in Cape Town, South Africa. The meeting was chaired by Dr. Dave Keetch, chairman of the committee.



A view of part of the TAC members during the meeting

ABNE's Phase I programme started 5 years ago and is ending in December 31, 2014. A new 5-year programme, referred to as Phase II, is planned for implementation from January 2015. In this context, TAC members went through the main management documents, including Director's report, finance, audit and consultant reports of 2014 activities and scrutinized the Phase II programme and particularly the work plan of Year 1, 2015.

Ultimately, TAC members made recommendations for the most effective and result-oriented management of the new ABNE's Phase II programme.

Participants' views on the meeting

Mr Lawrence Kent, Senior Programme Officer at Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF):

“Phase I of the ABNE programme has been a big success from our point of view. It was about training staff, creating institution, finding the right institutional home, building those relationships, consulting African regulators throughout the continent, really setting up a strong foundation with a number of support services. When we consider the study tours, the workshops, the training, the internships and functional biosafety regulatory systems in several countries I think that ABNE has made a strong contribution towards its goal trying to help African governments, African regulatory agencies to build up their own capacities to carry out the functions they have to play.



As the team now transitions from Phase I to Phase II, we hope that they can have basically a similar track. I feel like they are pointing to the right direction in providing services that are now in high demand. ABNE is receiving more requests from African governments for assistance that it can handle. So it is doing some prioritisation and trying to focus its efforts to those countries that seem to have the most promises when it comes to creating functional regulatory systems that can make informed science-based decisions on confined field trials (CFTs) and hopefully commercial releases. At the end, functional regulatory systems have a role to get effective and safe technology into the hands of smallholder farmers who then use them to improve their productivity and their lives.

Overall, the BMGF has been happy to be one of the co-funders of this initiative and they are very glad that the African Union (AU) through NEPAD in the current phase are actually co-funding this project and MSU is also involved as international partner. Now that BMGF is just one of several partners and that organisations like NEPAD itself is interested in this project, this augurs very well for the future.”



Mrs Prudence Galega, Technical Advisor to the Ministry of Environment, Protection of Nature and sustainable development of Cameroon, with special duties of National Focal Point for the Convention on Biological Diversity:

“Biosafety issues are kind of new and emerging in Africa and is very interesting to see a network that dedicates its time and efforts to accompany the countries that have showed the willingness to carry out CFTs and authorized introduction of genetically modified seeds. Most countries need to engage in this thematic issue that is linked very much to addressing food security issues and poverty alleviation issues using the agricultural sector. ABNE has taken very relevant and targeted measures to build the capacity of the key actors

who are involved in the biosafety process in the focus countries.

To deal with biosafety, the legislative framework must initially be in place to ensure that there can be a strong partnership between the private sector and the countries that are receiving this introduced species.

ABNE has a huge capacity and wants to upscale its achievements it has made in the first phase to cover more countries in Africa.

ABNE needs to be more present in Central Africa. Cameroon particularly is an emerging country that requires specific focus because the country has already carried out its first CFTs in the cotton industry and there is a very strong probability, based on the request of the application for release, that it would move into a general release so that we can commercialise Bt cotton. In the second phase of the ABNE programme, Cameroon is certainly on the radar and I think the negotiations will lead to very concrete capacity building issues. The experiences that ABNE has capitalized on biosafety in Africa will be very useful for Cameroon and the Central Africa region.”

Dr Frank Fear, Rural sociologist with focus on organization and community development. Professor Emeritus at Michigan State University (MSU), he has been faculty member for 35 years and is a former Senior Associate Dean of Agriculture and Natural Resources at MSU:

I was involved in the launch efforts of the ABNE program in Ouagadougou in 2010. This program became a priority for our college because of the nature of the work involved.

The first phase of the ABNE programme was very successful. The challenges are obvious and many. Anytime you are in a network, you are not working together with people in a regular basis. You are cutting across a variety of boundaries, you are

not in the same organisation and very often, you are not even in the same country. So it requires a significant amount of political skills, communication capacity, having a plan but being able to adapt and being flexible with that plan.

The first phase of the ABNE programme has been very successful and a lot of the lessons that were learnt are clearly represented in what has been planned in Phase II. The challenge of starting an enterprise from scratch is that it takes a significant amount of time to build your organisation. That was the major outcome of Phase I. Now, the focus has to be on 2 points; firstly more results and greater impact and secondly you cannot control the future but it is important to develop a plan so that countries are at a point that they can move on without ABNE as we know it today. There must be a sustainability plan so that the end of the second phase of ABNE programme does not mean a crash across Africa. ABNE will continue for sure after Phase II but it may not continue with the level of funding that it has now and with the capacity that comes with that funding.”





Dr Yona Baguma, Acting Deputy Director General of the National Agricultural Research Organisation of Uganda, responsible for coordinating research across the country

“This meeting has been very successful, very fruitful and productive. We have come up with very well structured recommendations which will move ABNE definitely to the next level. I have enjoyed being part of this meeting, with very great people. ABNE programme should be able to provide a leadership across the continent to ensure that we ideally move away from just testing materials in the field to real commercialization to ensure that we bring about new positive scenarios to the entire agricultural sector in Africa.”

HE Jean-Baptiste Natama from the AU paid a visit to NEPAD Agency ABNE

His Excellency Jean-Baptiste Natama, Chief of Staff to the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, paid a visit to NEPAD Agency African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) in Ouagadougou. His Excellency is on holidays in Burkina Faso and he seized the opportunity to meet members of ABNE staff based in Ouagadougou. During the visit he was informed through a presentation of ABNE services across the continent, impacts made and challenges encountered by the Director.



HE Jean-Baptiste Natama (blue dress in the middle), during the meeting with ABNE staff

« In 5 years, ABNE has done a tremendous job; it has trained more than 2,000 African regulators following requests for services, in this case training in various aspects of biosafety. It is important to note that ABNE interventions are demand-driven. Thus, the various requests received and processed have allowed training of more than 2,000 people. This is a huge work, from our point of view. We now encourage ABNE to continue

so that we can have the critical mass of human resources knowledgeable on the issues of biosafety, from environmental, food safety, socio-economic to legal and political point of view “, he said.

« For us, biosafety is important because today our main objective is to invest in African people, by investing in education, health and food production for Africans. Talking about food implies two angles: qualitative and quantitative food. So food security is important at the quantitative as well as the qualitative levels. And biosafety helps to ensure food quality across the continent, from the production stage to the processing. It is obvious that biosafety, especially food safety will have a positive impact on the people’s health in Africa,” he added.

According to Diran Makinde, Director of NEPAD Agency ABNE, “the visit of HE Jean-Baptiste Natama is an honor for all staff. It was a great opportunity to interact with him and better understand how to fine tune development initiatives within the African Union and NEPAD Agency ABNE. It was also encouraging that such a high profile visitor can have time to visit us and commend ABNE for job well done towards the attainment of food security and sustainable development in Africa. “

NEW STAFF



Mr Sunday Igu Rocks Akile is the Programme Officer for Legal/Policy on Biosafety Issues. He is a seasoned legal practitioner with several successful court cases to his name in his country, Uganda.

Before joining ABNE he was a member of Uganda’s National Biosafety Committee for 5 years sitting on the committee as a legal expert. His contribution to the National Biosafety Committee was immense. This Committee is known to have handled several CFT applications making Uganda the leading country in Sub-Saharan Africa to have conducted the highest number of CFTs in Agricultural Biotechnology. Sunday has earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Laws from Makerere University, Uganda and a Post Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice of his country. He has also earned numerous awards in Biosafety regulatory trainings both from his country and abroad. He is very knowledgeable in the legal and policy aspects of Biosafety regulation.



Dr. Olalekan Akinbo holds a Bachelor of Science in Agronomy (Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Nigeria), Master of Science in Plant Pathology (University of Ibadan, Nigeria) and Doctorate degree in Genetics and Plant Breeding

(University of the Free State, South Africa). He was a scholar at International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA, Ibadan, Nigeria) for a Master programme, a pre-doctoral fellow of Rockefeller at International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Cali Colombia, a post-doctoral fellow of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation at Michigan State University USA on Biosafety and Biotechnology. He has attended numerous summer courses on biosafety in the USA and Europe.

Prior to Joining ABNE as Biosafety Programme Officer he was ABNE’s part time Programme Officer (Nigeria Country Coordinator). He also worked as a consultant with Donald Danforth Plant Science Centre (USA) and National Root Crops Research Institute (Nigeria). He has published his research works in both international and regional peer review journals.



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