NEPAD Agency ABNE Implements a High Level Advocacy Visit to Mozambique

NEPAD Agency ABNE and partner Michigan State University (MSU) implemented a high level advocacy visit to Mozambique from 30th – 31st May, 2016. The team comprises of Prof. Diran Makinde (Senior Advisor to NEPAD CEO), Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo (Head of NEPAD Regional Office, Dakar and Director of NEPAD Agency ABNE), Dr. Olalekan Akinbo (Biosafety Programme Officer and Country leader Mozambique) and Prof. Karim Maredia (Michigan State University Professor and Principal Investigator of ABNE programme).

Members of the delegation from NEPAD Agency ABNE and MSU first met with the Director General of Mozambique Agricultural Research Institute (IIAM) and the WEMA project team. They then visited the confined field trials (CFT) facility in Chokwe for compliance, before meeting with the GiIBS Ad hoc committee member and the Hon. Minister, Professor Jorge Nhambiu.

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Among the key outcomes of this high level visit, it was agreed that phytosanitary import permit for WEMA seed for the CFT will be facilitated shortly. Also, regulatory compliance requirement by WEMA CFT is expected to be completed within weeks before the approval of the import permit is ready. GIIBs membership will be fully constituted within the next couple of months and inaugurated. A memorandum of understanding will be submitted and signed between ABNE and GIIBs secretariat for capacity building with Action plans and timelines.

The Hon. Minister appreciated NEPAD Agency ABNE for the initiative with our international partner (MSU) in conducting this timely visit. He highly recognized ABNE efforts towards establishment of functional regulatory system in the continent. Continuous capacity building of the GIIBs secretariat staff members is of paramount importance in building confidence of Mozambicans in their regulators towards science-based decision-making with respect to biosafety in the country.

Technical Meeting on the Revision Process of the Senegalese Biosafety Law

NEPAD Agency ABNE, in partnership with Senegal National Biosafety Authority, organized a one-day technical meeting on the revision process of the country’s biosafety law. The meeting was officially opened by Mrs Ramatoulaye N'Diaye, Secretary General of the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, after the Head of NEPAD Regional Office And Director of NEPAD Agency ABNE, Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo introduced the objectives of the meeting and the expectations from the NEPAD Agency. Around twenty people took part in this meeting including officials from the Ministry of Environment, University professors and lecturers, and ABNE experts.

In her opening remarks, Mrs N'Diaye said that “the revision of the biosafety law is a long process as it requires a consensus from various interested parties and stakeholders”. According to Mr. Ousseyni Kasse, Executive Director of the National Biosafety Authority, this technical meeting aimed to amend the draft submitted by the consultants and to agree on the way forward. Dr Tinga Jeremy Ouedraogo, Head of NEPAD Regional Office in Dakar reaffirmed that “NEPAD Agency ABNE is a tool established to support African countries on biosafety matters and therefore ABNE is ready to support the Government of Senegal in its journey towards the implementation of a functional biosafety system”.

Major part of the discussions during the meeting focused on the provisions of the revised draft on the institutional arrangements, and how they relate to the regional framework being developed at the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) level. It was agreed that the national law focuses on the national context and priorities, as the regional biosafety framework is yet to be adopted.
It was agreed that the Minister of Environment remains the official Competent Authority with mandate to take discussion by signing all forms of authorizations regarding the use of biotechnology and products. A National Biosafety Committee will be established with a mandate to review biosafety applications and with the support of an ad hoc Scientific Committee which composition will be decided on a case by case basis.

Obviously the one-day gathering was not enough to end the discussions on the draft. Therefore it was agreed to establish a select committee to finalize the draft based on the various inputs, before a next technical meeting is scheduled.

Participants share their views

Babacar Salif Gueye, Technical Advisor, Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development

“This meeting was a milestone towards an inclusive law on biosafety which is a challenge currently. We all know that in Africa, this is a problem that we need to foresee. This law will really be an instrument that will enable us to manage all the arising issues on public safety and national security as well. This workshop was extremely productive beyond even our expectations. We thank NEPAD Agency ABNE for this support at all levels”.

Prof. Pape M. Dieng, University of St Louis, Senegal and Consultant

“This workshop was very productive. It was about discussions among a select group on how to review the Senegalese biosafety law and how to improve it with respect to the change brought by the Protocol of Nagoya Kuala-Lumpur on Liability and Redress. With NEPAD Agency ABNE support, we will continue this work and as some ABNE experts are now based in Dakar, their technical support will be substantial. And now with the National Biosafety Authority which is very dynamic, things will certainly move forward”.
Sensitization workshop on biosafety regulations for Swaziland legislators and study visit to South Africa

NEPAD Agency ABNE and The Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa / Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (ACTESA/COMESA) facilitated a sensitization workshop on biosafety regulations for Swaziland legislators and a study visit to South Africa from 10th – 12th May, 2016. The workshop and study tour to farmers’ field in Limpopo were for science based awareness creation towards the revision of the Swaziland Biosafety ACT of 2012.

Twenty-three participants took part in this meeting including 11 Member of Parliament from Agriculture and Environment portfolio, 3 participants from Swaziland Environmental Authority (SEA), 1 from Ministry of Agriculture, 2 from the cotton board, and 5 from ACTESA.

Among the range of topics treated are the Challenges of Cotton Sector Development in Swaziland, Biotechnology and its management, Liability and Redress, General discussions, Field visit and way forward.
Parliamentarians appreciated NEPAD Agency ABNE and ACTESA for conducting this timely workshop and field visit to Limpopo Bt Cotton and Bt Maize field in South Africa. Through their spokesperson the MPs acknowledged that the training has considerably improved their understanding of the technology and the regulatory process.

NEPAD Agency ABNE is committed to providing support for continuous capacity building of the SEA staff members to increase confidence in science-based decision-making for the implementation of a functional biosafety system in Swaziland.

**Sensitization Seminar for Burkina Faso Government Officials, Members of Parliament and Media specialists, on agricultural biotechnology and biosafety**

NEPAD Agency ABNE, in partnership with Burkina Faso national agricultural research institute (INERA) and its hosted chapter of Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology in Africa (OFAB) and African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) organized an information sharing seminar in Ouagadougou on 19 April, 2016. The meeting was attended by more than 80 participants including high level government officials, representatives from leading African biotechnology and biosafety organizations, civil society members and local and international journalists.

The meeting was timely as information is currently being widely spread over the country facing issues with Bt. It aimed to bring together leading African biosafety and biotechnology stakeholders to share information and experiences with local decision makers on biotechnology and biosafety, and also to provide an opportunity for participants to have a better understanding of the context and status of biotechnology and biosafety in Burkina Faso and to refine strategies that would enhance related science communication in the country.

As an outcome, the Ouagadougou meeting provided a good platform for government officials and scientists to speak out for the first time since the Bt cotton issue was amplified through different media. Prof. Filiga Michel Sawadogo, Minister of Higher Education Scientific Research and Innovation, said that “rejecting biotechnology would lead to a missed opportunity for the country”. He congratulated the organizations that initiated the meeting and suggested to continue such information sharing initiatives for all strategic leaders including cabinet members.
Dr. Jeremy Tinga Ouedraogo, Head of NEPAD Agency ABNE Regional Office, former Burkinabè Minister of Livestock, and former Head of the Plant Genetics and Biotechnology laboratory at INERA said he is confident that a solution will soon be found to the fiber length issue that Bt cotton is facing. He said this situation is an opportunity to reflect, to grow stronger and to see peculiarly who to involve in the process to address emerging challenges of biotechnology and biosafety in the country.

After eight years of Bt cotton commercialization, Burkina Faso has become, these last few years, a target of global anti-GMO activists who regularly organize protests against the development of biotechnology in the country. Local companies are experiencing challenges in commercializing Bt cotton, due to a slightly shorter fiber length, and they therefore decided in early April 2016 to stop the production of Bt cotton until a solution is found by the technology developer and local scientists.

Activists saw this decision as a godsend to put higher pressure on decision makers to completely stop biotech initiatives in the country and to adopt a moratorium on GM technology. To avoid any misunderstanding, cotton companies have issued a clear statement recently on April 20 stating that “it is out of question to stop the partnership with Monsanto at this stage, or to challenge the GM technology and the effectiveness of the introduced genes in the defensive system of the cotton plant. AICB and all stakeholders in the cotton sector, reaffirm their commitment to biotechnology, as it could provide solutions to the current challenges the Burkinabe agriculture in general, and cotton cropping in particular, are facing.

Dr Hamidou Traoré, Director General of INERA highlighted that Bt cotton is not the only biotech crop in Burkina Faso. Several other commodities including cowpea, maize and sorghum are in the pipeline. Pr Chantal Zoungrana/Kabore, Director General of the National biosafety agency (ANB) insisted that the decision made by cotton companies to stop Bt cotton production is a temporary decision to solve the lint length issue. It is based on trade issues and as soon as scientists will come up with a GM cotton with the desirable traits including lint length, it will be adopted.
NEPAD Agency ABNE in partnership with the Togolese Ministry of Environment and Forest Resources (MERF) organized a seminar for news editors from Togo and Burkina Faso on biotechnology and biosafety communications, in Lome, from June 14 – 15, 2016. The seminar was officially opened by Mr. Tata Kagni AMEGBOH, Technical Advisor to the Ministry of Environment, on behalf of the Minister, together with Dr. Moussa Savadogo, ABNE Senior Program Officer, representing the NEPAD’s Head of Regional Office in West Africa and ABNE Director.

In his opening remarks, Mr. AMEGBOH, expressed the gratitude of the Togolese government to NEPAD Agency ABNE for its continued support to African countries and especially Togo, for the implementation of workable regulatory systems based on the Cartagena Protocol and the Protocol of Nagoya Kuala Lumpur. He highlighted that thanks to ABNE various actors from Togo benefited from capacity building support to be able to effectively contribute to the revision of the biosafety law of 2009.

Dr Moussa Savadogo, on behalf of NEPAD Agency ABNE Director, reaffirmed NEPAD’s availability to continue to support the implementation of a functional biosafety system in Togo. Concerning the role of journalists in this process, he said that “they have to communicate objectively on biotechnology and biosafety, by informing policy ad decision makers and the public so that informed decisions are taken for the benefit of all, including grassroots stakeholders”.

14 experienced journalists and news editors from various media houses, including print, electronic and online media, participated in this seminar. Resource persons included lecturers in Agricultural Biotechnology and Food safety from the University of Lome, and ABNE experts. Through presentations and discussions, participants were taken through the basics of biotechnology and biosafety, especially the concept of modern biotechnology, food and environmental safety, and the regulation aspects. This gave Togolese participants the opportunity to discover and appreciate the great expertise available in their own country.

At the end of the seminar and based on the relevance of the subject matter that was discussed, Togolese participants decided to establish a network that will effectively and constructively support the development of science and technology to the benefit of the country. As an initial action, they immediately set up a committee of four chief editors that was tasked to develop statutes and memoranda of the Togo Network of Science Communication Journalists.
Participants’ views on the seminar

Cyr Payim Ouedraogo, Chairman of Burkina Faso network of biotech communication journalists (RECOAB) and founder of a pro-science magazine, Info Sciences Culture

“This is really a rather original initiative to bring together here in Lomé news editors from Burkina Faso and Togo. It would be good to consider replicating such initiatives in Francophone countries where ABNE is operating to ensure the implementation of functional biosafety systems. There are actors who have experience elsewhere and who can share their experience with these to incite countries them to organize and publish more objective and professional information and further inform the public so that they constructively participate in the process. If those who should give information to the public have no clear idea of biotechnology and biosafety this means that there is an important link that would be missing in the chain of information. I really commend ABNE for this initiative that contributes to fill this need. The question now is to see with the support of other structures how such initiatives can continue and be strengthened”.

Simone Dakiche, News Editor, Radio Kanal FM, Lome

“I leave this training with lots of information on biotechnology and biosafety. Currently in Togo, the subject seems not to be valid but we are to get there. With this training we must already start preparing our minds to be ready when things start moving on the ground. As journalists, we must be able to facilitate discussions objectively and show a real mastery of the subject and somehow act on the collective consciousness to help people make informed choices. Presenters were able to find simple words to help understand the subject. I hope we will be able to also restitute and share all this in simple words, to contribute to demystify science. I also liked the idea that germinated here to form a network for a synergy of action and actually impact on scientific progress in our countries because there is a gap in this area that need to be filled”.

Gilles Bocco, Managing Editor, New World TV Lomé

“This workshop was very rich. I have twenty years career as a journalist and this is the first time I hear science-based statements on biotechnology and genetically modified organisms. Before, we have been fed with the anti-GMO communication. I also appreciated the quality of presenters and panelists who were resource persons, eminent university professors, biologists who know what they speak of, and also preeminent journalists who have a rich experience in communication on biosafety in a country like Burkina Faso, which is ahead in this area. Participants were also well selected because they were very interested in the debate and this was reflected through questions and exchanges. Exchanges were really rich and focused on concrete experiences with immediate applications and journalists felt the need to create a network through which they could continue this exchange». 
Odette Kpira, News Editor at Radio Lome

«My impressions on this meeting are very positive because I learned a lot. Before I used to make confusion between organic and biotech products but with this training I learned many things. I learned a lot on GMOs and I understand now that the problem of Africa today is hunger and we really need to find a science or technology to move forward. Biotechnology is really one of the tools to try to alleviate hunger in Africa and maybe around the world. The population is growing and arable land is reduced and we have been trying with very little success to increase crop production with conventional farming».

Follow Up, Technical Support and Planning Missions to Ethiopia and Malawi

The Head of NEPAD Agency’s Regional Office and Director of ABNE, Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo, with two Program Officers carried out follow up, technical support and planning mission to Ethiopia and Malawi from 12 - 18 June 2016. The objective of this mission was to identify gaps, consolidate gains and help plan future biosafety undertakings in the target countries. In addition, it was important for the new Head of NEPAD Agency Regional Office to meet with key stakeholders in both countries to reinforce NEPAD Agency ABNE’s presence and its biosafety services in the focus countries.

In each country, the visiting team met senior government officials, regulators, researchers and other stakeholders, discussed progresses, challenges and opportunities for future intervention by ABNE in order to help the countries in their endeavors for harnessing modern biotechnology to enhance agricultural productivity and production while ensuring safety to human health and the environment.

The team was briefed on progress made in the biosafety area as a result of the continuous capacity building support that NEPAD Agency ABNE was able to provide to the countries. Malawi has approved the environmental release of Bt cotton and additional CFT of genetically modified (GM)
In Ethiopia, quite a number of things are in a rapid flux. NEPAD Agency ABNE will assist finalizing the Biosafety Directives and will support the training of regulators to internalize and implement the Directives. In addition, ABNE will impart practical skills on regulatory handling of CFTs. Moreover, biotechnology and biosafety communication is a matter of priority for ABNE’s intervention to ensure that science-based information is shared to the public.

The team was able to meet Ethiopia’s State Minister for Environment, Forestry and Climate Change, Honorable Kare Chewicha who reiterated the Government’s unflinching interest and commitment to harness modern the country. The GM seeds for the trials (two Bt cotton hybrids from India and an open pollinated Bt cotton variety from Sudan) have already been introduced and will be planted this year.

The Honorable State Minister appreciated NEPAD Agency ABNE’s continued support for biosafety capacity building as the country looks forward to adopting this platform technology. Ethiopia has also recently approved the establishment of Ethiopian Institute of Biotechnology under the Ministry of Science and Technology. The team met the newly appointed Director General of this institute in his current office at Addis Ababa University.

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NEPAD Agency ABNE and The Alliance for Commodity Trade in Eastern and Southern Africa / Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (ACTESA/COMESA) brought Technical support for the revision of the Swaziland Biosafety ACT 2012 on 21\textsuperscript{st} June, 2016 in Ezulwini.

After a sensitization workshop on biosafety regulations for Swaziland legislators and a study visit to South Africa facilitated by NEPAD Agency ABNE and ACTESA/COMESA in last May, the Swaziland Environment Authority (SEA) requested for the guidance of ABNE technical expertise, ahead of the parliamentary request in preparing and expediting the amendment process of the biosafety ACT 2012.

Twenty-eight participants, all members of the National Board of Advisory Committee (NBAC) attended this meeting. This was an opportunity to assess and discuss all the recommendations made by a hired consultant on the deficiency of the Act and those components that needed revisions for more investor friendly regulations with the suggested use of appropriate languages.

Liability and Redress Clause and the best global practices in accordance with the supplementary protocol were also examined. This meeting enabled participants to agree on the way forward to consider revision of the Biosafety regulatory Act of 2012.

SEA and other legal stakeholders now understand the provision of the Nagoya / Kuala Lumpur Protocol on Liability and Redress for the amendment of their ACT. With this revision, meeting the Swaziland Biosafety Act of 2012 is now ready for the Parliamentarian request.
Upcoming events

- **03 – 08 July**: Training on Biosafety administration and decision making and technical evaluation of dossiers in Cameroon
- **10 – 13 July**: Sensitization of major stakeholders to manage any fallout from the passage of the regulations and guidelines in Ghana
- **10 – 13 July**: Formalization of cooperation for implementing biosafety capacity building interventions in Namibia
- **12 – 14 July**: Training workshop on biosafety directives for GMOs and GM crop CFT regulatory handling in Ethiopia
- **17 – 18 July**: Host country agreement signing ceremony in Uganda
- **24 – 27 July**: Participation in risk assessment for transgenic mosquito vectors training workshop (for Malians Regulators) in Senegal
- **26 – 30 July**: International biosafety short course at the Godfrey Okoye University in Nigeria
- **31 July to 03 August**: Technical support to National Biosafety Management Agency for the development of guideline documents on socio-economic considerations; review of draft regulations for labeling and review of biosafety communication plan in Nigeria
- **03 – 05 August**: Policy roundtable to support the biosafety system guided by the theme “Beyond a biosafety decision: the role of stakeholder institutions”
- **14 – 18 August**: Hands-on technical training on application review for general release in Ghana
- **09 – 11 August**: Scientists and regulators forum on biosafety of GMOs in Malawi.
- **15 – 19 August**: Capacity building of Grupo Inter - Institucional Sobre Bio-Segurança (GIIBS) secretariat on inspection, monitoring, compliance and biosafety administration in Mozambique