

AUDA-NEPAD ABNE Technical Advisory Committee successfully held its 11th annual meeting in Nairobi



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AUDA-NEPAD ABNE Technical Advisory Committee successfully held its 11th annual meeting in Nairobi

The Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of AUDA-NEPAD African Biosafety Network of Expertise (ABNE) successfully held its 11th annual meeting from 5 – 6 December in Nairobi, Kenya.

The meeting was chaired by Dr Dave Keetch from South Africa, Chair of the TAC. Were present in this meeting prof Magdy Madkour, Emeritus professor at Ain Shams university/Egypt, Dr Yaa Osei retired Lecturer from Kwame Nkrumah University Of Science and Technology, Prof. Charudatta D. Mayee from the **Indian** Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), Dr Franck Fear from Michigan State University/USA, Mr Lawrence Kent from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation/USA, Dr Yona Baguma from the National Agricultural Research Organisation/Uganda and Doug Buhler from MSU/USA. Were also present, as observers, members of ABNE management team: Mr Talla Kebe, Head of AUDA-NEPAD Directorate of Knowledge Management, Evaluation and Centres of Excellence, Dr Jeremy Tinga Ouedraogo, ABNE Director, and Dr Karim Maredia, from MSU/USA.

In his opening remarks, Dr Dave Keetch welcomed participants and commended the ABNE team for the preparation of the meeting and for the activities carried out in 2019. Welcome remarks were also given by Mr. Lawrence Kent, on behalf of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, major donor of the programme, and by Dr. Doug Buhler, from Michigan State University, technical partner of the ABNE programme.

The opening ceremony was followed by the presentation of ABNE Director's Report and the Annual Technical Progress Report. A presentation of ABNE 2020 work plan, followed by discussions and comments, closed the first day sessions.



Group picture of TAC members and ABNE management team during the meeting. In the foreground Ms Miriam Rahedi from NEPAD/APRM Kenya Secretariat, host of the meeting, Dr Dave Keetch, TAC Chair from South Africa, and Dr Yaa Osei, TAC member from Ghana.

The second day of the meeting was dedicated to TAC deliberations and recommendations. Among its observations, TAC noted with enthusiasm the transformation of the NEPAD Agency into the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) and the fact that AUDA-NEPAD is now the continental development agency of the African Union with ABNE as the AU- Biosafety programme in the Centre of Excellence on Rural Resources and Food Systems. TAC also commended the management and staff of ABNE for “the good progress that has been made over the past year in strengthening functional biosafety systems in Africa and empowering African regulators and policy makers to make informed decisions on biosafety applications for Confined Field Trials, National Performance Trials and the Commercial Release of biotech crops.”

Noting the increasing interest among African states in the potential benefits to be derived from the use of various newly developed plant breeding techniques such as genome editing, gene drives, Zinc Finger Nucleases, TALENS, ODM and CRISPR Cas, TAC peculiarly recommended that attention be given to the development of a harmonised policy for AU member states on the regulation of the products derived from these new techniques. TAC also recommended that ABNE continue to maintain and expand its role as a reliable and objective biosafety service provider in Africa.

Successful biotechnology and biosafety study tour to India for African delegates

India, the other Asian giant ranks today among the emerging markets. Africa has a lot to learn from India which, in many respects, has similarities to the continent: a dynamic population with fairly similar agro-ecological conditions and dominance of smallholder farmers, but also enormous food security and natural resources management challenges.

It is in this context that the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), in collaboration with Michigan State University in the USA, organized from 8 to 16 February, 2020, a study tour at three locations in India covering New Delhi, Jalna and Hyderabad. Delegates from different African countries, including Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria and Togo took part in this study tour.



Part of participants during the visit of Kalash Seeds facilities in Jalna, India

The purpose of the study tour was to provide to regulators and scientists with an opportunity to learn from India's experience in B.t. cotton. In the Indian capital, New Delhi, they were able to exchange views with the first officials of the Indian Council for Agricultural Research, which groups together around a hundred research institutes across country in the various agricultural commodities. The participants were also able to immerse themselves in the legislative and institutional framework for biosafety and crop improvement, including the role of the state and national government agencies, the private sector,

and civil society in the legal and institutional framework.

In Jalna, participants were able to touch on the realities of B.t. cotton with the crucial role played by the private sector in this area. They were amazed by the performances of private companies such as Kalash Seeds specializing in the production of hybrid crops and the Mahyco Company, giant of the production of hybrid cotton and GMOs. They were also able to see in Hyderabad the results of the research of private companies like Nucleome Informatics, one of the companies in the world



Group picture of participants in a cotton field near Jalna.

specialized in the sequencing of genomes, and also JK Seeds which invests in research and development of improved cotton and cereals crops such as B.t. cotton, hybrid millet and hybrid sorghum. Another essential step in this study tour was the visit to the headquarters of the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in Hyderabad, which has numerous representations in Africa and has achieved outstanding research

outcomes in fields like aflatoxin (control in various commodities including groundnuts).

With its fast-growing demography, it is urgent that Africa acquire the tools necessary to modernize its agricultural production and enhance productivity in order to achieve food self-sufficiency and produce wealth for a harmonious and sustainable development, beneficial to all layers of population.

Participants share their views on the study tour

Prof. ALEKA Fekadu Beyene, Commissioner at the Environment, Forest and Climate Change Commission of Ethiopia

“I am impressed of how the seed companies are developed in India and how they are collaborating with many actors, and address the real issues of smallholder farmers. This can be useful for African smallholder farmers.”

Prof. Aleka emphasized that the Indian experience better benefits smallholder farmers in Africa because the conditions and the systems in India are related to Africa than the experiences elsewhere. He stressed, “to fully benefit from this, we will also need adaptive research in Africa and trials and cooperation with local research

systems, universities and extension structures. I would really like African researchers to try to work in close collaboration with researchers elsewhere that are responding to the needs of their resource poor farmers. Research needs to be relevant and adapted to their context and must address local farmers’ problems.”



Dr. Diarrassouba Nafan, Director of UFR des Sciences Biologiques, University of Korhogo in Cote d'Ivoire, and member of the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Council.

“We came here to India to learn about their technological innovations and especially their rich experience in B.t. cotton. This visit has allowed us to see the policy behind biotechnology and biosafety in the country and to understand Indian realities and this gives us perspectives and ideas regarding the innovations that we must introduce in our country.

As a researcher, the field visits really impressed me and in particular the visits to seed production sites in Jalna. These are initiatives that we are able to introduce in our countries. It is private individuals who have harnessed the techniques for producing improved GMO and non-GMO seeds. Today more and more, it is no longer a question of throwing out of hand all that is GMO but it is rather necessary to focus on the legislation which can allow those who want to use also the different technologies do so, to be able to cope with often very difficult production conditions in the context of climate change. Such initiatives are really welcome and we thank AUDA-NEPAD and Michigan State University and all the institutions we visited in India for their contribution to the success of this study tour.



M. Alhousseïni Boubacar, Head of « Département Conventions, Accords et Traités at Agence de l'Environnement et du Développement Durable (AEDD) », Focal Point of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in Mali.

"I thank AUDA-NEPAD and Michigan States University for allowing us to participate in this study tour. We do not always realize the importance of technology in Africa and we often look at technology from a far without wondering if we can reach to that level. Thanks to this visit, I have a good understanding of agricultural technology different from what I had before.

I also thank the Indian partners who welcomed us with open arms and who opened all doors for us. We visited seed companies, laboratories as well as greenhouses and fields, and the doors were always open. They are partners who are ready to help us on all fronts. It would be useful to include participants from the private sector in Africa in this kind of visit so that stakeholders in this sector in Africa can see what is being done in India in terms of improved seed production and technological innovations. As soon as I return, I would like to launch the idea so that such an initiative can materialize.



We will still need the support of AUDA-NEPAD, not only at the technical and financial level but also in terms of advocacy with our States to try to raise awareness because we always have a fixed idea of the past. Today, with what I have seen and what is happening in the world, if we are not careful, we will not be able to reach the food self-sufficiency that African countries currently strive to achieve.”

Workshops on WEMA maize event deregulation pathway and finalization of a Directive on Grievance Hearing Committee on Biosafety in Ethiopia

African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD), in partnership with the Ethiopian Commission for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, organized back-to-back consultative workshops on WEMA maize event deregulation and review and finalization of a Directive on Grievance Hearing Committee on Biosafety from 25 – 28 November 2019 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The workshop on the Directive to establish and operationalize the Grievance Hearing Committee was convened from 25-26 November 2019 and was attended by 15 domestic participants. The key objective of the workshop was to undertake the revision and finalization of a Directive to establish Grievance Hearing Committee on Biosafety as provided in Article 23 of the amended Biosafety Proclamation (Proclamation No. 896/2015).



A view of participants of the Workshop on Grievance Hearing Committee, 25-26 November 2019.

During the conclusion of the Directive review workshop, the need for sensitization and awareness creation on the biosafety regulatory tools and their application especially in regional states where GM crop technologies are or will be deployed was raised. In the years ahead, strengthening capacities of knowledge institutions such as universities and research centres in the regions was agreed upon.

The workshop on WEMA maize event deregulation pathway was convened from 27-28 November 2019

and was attended by 14 domestic participants. In this workshop, a range of experiences and influences on the regulatory pathways for event approval for environmental release and commercialization were discussed. The AUDA-NEPAD delegates advised the Ethiopian regulators to study various biosafety experiences BUT only pick those ideas that would serve Ethiopia's interests.

At the conclusion of the workshop on WEMA maize regulatory pathway, the need for support in important

areas such as regulation of genome editing applications, regulation of stack traits and skills in international negotiations was pointed out. As per its continental mandate, AUDA-NEPAD ABNE will continue to provide technical support to Ethiopia and other African countries to enhance the functionality of biosafety regulatory systems necessary for safe use of biotechnologies for sustainable development.

Capacity strengthening on biosafety communication and reporting for media practitioners, scientists and regulators in Rwanda

AUDA-NEPAD ABNE organized a 3-day biosafety communication and reporting training for media practitioners and communicators/scientists from Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA) and Rwanda Agriculture Board (RAB), from 11 – 13 December, 2019.

With the final drafts of the legal instruments for biosafety regulation including the Biosafety Policy, Biosafety Law and Ministerial Order already validated by stakeholders, the current focus was to ensure the enactment process is guided by well-informed considerations. This entailed ensuring adequate understanding of and public awareness on biotechnology and biosafety issues by the policy makers and general public.

The Director General (REMA), Eng Colletha Ruhamy, gave the opening remarks at the training. A total of 28 participants drawn from 17 media institutions, and also from REMA and RAB, were empowered to adopt a structured approach to biosafety communication, exercise control on the delivery of key messages and ensure a continuous and systematic process of information sharing thereby addressing public misconception about products of modern biotechnology. The trained journalists admitted that the experience was the first of its kind, being a forum where journalists had opportunity to objectively interact with scientists, and enjoined AUDA-NEPAD not to relent in providing further support to strengthen biosafety communication in the country. Importantly, development of the biosafety communication strategy



Participants simulating an editorial board room scenario



Participants doing an exercise on communication strategy

was initiated, with the participants highlighting the stakeholders, communicator groups and mode/means of communication.

The trained communicators committed to ensuring collaboration and objective exchange of information towards effective public awareness on issues of biotechnology and biosafety in Rwanda. Further support on strengthening

biosafety communication capacity was a critical and consensus request from all participants, thereby reiterating the remarks by the DG, REMA. Support will also be provided for the drafting, finalization and implementation of the biosafety communication strategy as appropriate.

With the progress towards establishment of a functional biosafety regulatory system in Rwanda, increasing activism with associated misinformation coupled with low institutional capacity to communicate biosafety may erode enactment process. AUDA-NEPAD will therefore, continue to ensure further support is provided to strengthen institutional capacity in biosafety communication, in order to sustain the progressive momentum. Furthermore, AUDA-NEPAD will continue to support the political will expressed in Rwanda to enhance socio-economic development in accordance with Agenda 2063.

Meeting between AUDA-NEPAD ABNE and Agence Nationale de Biosecurité in Burkina Faso

AUDA-NEPAD ABNE staff in Ouagadougou led by Dr Moussa Savadogo had a meeting with Agence nationale de biosécurité (ANB) team on 24 January, 2020, in ANB premises, in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. ANB is the Burkina Faso national biosafety agency that governs all biosafety matters in the country.

The key objective of this meeting was to introduce to the new DG of ANB, Prof. Nicolas Barro, the ABNE team in Burkina Faso, the mandate given to the newly transformed African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) in general and particularly

the mission of the ABNE programme under the Center of Excellence for Rural Resources and Food Systems.

During the meeting, Dr Savadogo highlighted the institutional transformation of AUDA-NEPAD and elaborated on the role ABNE in building functional biosafety regulatory systems in Africa. He also pointed out ABNE achievements in Africa so far and its priority interventions in Burkina Faso.

Prof. Barro thanked ABNE team for the visit and the meeting. “The working session we had was rich both in terms of strategic information, support and pragmatic



Group picture of the participants; in the center, Dr Moussa Savadogo, 4th from left and Prof. Nicolas Barro, 5th from left.

advice as well. The challenge of modern biotechnologies for the development of Africa invites us to solidarity for concerted efforts for the development of the continent. Burkina has embarked on this journey in compliance with biosafety legal instruments.”

Prof. Barro also asked for more support from AUDA-NEPAD especially in terms of legal documents,

decisions of the Heads of State of the AU and other relevant reports and statements.

On behalf of ABNE Director, Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo, Dr Savadogo assured Prof. Barro of ABNE commitment for Burkina Faso and its National Biosafety Agency, so as to consolidate the achievements and to make it a model especially in the area of biosafety for the other member states of the African Union.

Stakeholders' Deliberations on the National Biosafety and Biosecurity Strategy in Niger

The National Center for Strategic Studies and Security (*Centre National d'Études Stratégiques et de Sécurité - CNESS*) of Niger together with eleven sectoral ministries, in partnership with African Union Development Agency – NEPAD held a national stakeholders consultation on the national biosafety and biosecurity draft document, on 7 November, 2019, in Niamey. The objective of the meeting was to finalize the strategy document and technically endorse it before it is tabled to the Government for final adoption.

More than a hundred participants drawn from relevant government departments, international partner institutions, research institutes, universities and the civil society attended the meeting.

The opening ceremony was chaired by M. Ouhoumoudou Mahamadou, Minister and 'Directeur de Cabinet' of the President of the Republic of Niger which shows the high priority accorded to this process by the top level political authorities of the country. Mr Ouhoumoudou was accompanied by M. Mallam Zaneidou Amirou, Minister of Industry, Mrs Ramatou Doula Talata, Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic and several senior officers from the Ministry of Defense and Security.

AUDA-NEPAD CEO was represented by Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo, Head of the AUDA-NEPAD Regional Office for West Africa, accompanied by the Principal Program Officer for Environmental Biosafety and the



From left to right : Colonel Major Mahamadou Seydou Magagi, Director of CNESS, M. Ouhoumoudou Mahamadou, Minister and 'Directeur de Cabinet' of the President of the Republic of Niger, and Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo, Head of AUDA-NEPAD Regional Office for West Africa.

Communications Officer.

In his opening remarks, Mr Ouhoumoudou Mahamadou recalled that “the government of Niger has adopted the national biosafety Act which was subsequently approved by the Parliament in October 2019. This law is a key legal instrument that will allow the country to safely manage modern biotechnology applications in the country”.

He also highlighted the importance of the national biosafety strategy that will serve as a roadmap for inter-ministerial actions in the biosafety area. “The national biosafety strategy envisions to broaden the scope of the legal and institutional framework to take account of all aspects of biosafety and biosecurity so that Niger people can have access to safe food and safe environment”, he added.



Group picture of participants with high level government officials

Dr Jeremy Ouedraogo, on behalf of AUDA-NEPAD CEO, congratulated Niger for its move towards fulfilling its commitments with respect to the domestication and application of the international biosafety conventions and treaties. He added that “this meeting today marks almost the end of a process started in April 2019 to strengthen the national biosafety legal and policy framework. This process has been very dynamic and particularly intense and the African Union Development Agency has always been proud to support every decisive step in this journey. It is this set of concerted actions, initiated and conducted within the framework of this partnership with CNESS that has led to the results and highly strategic products that the people of Niger are about to endorse today.”

During the meeting, the draft strategy document was presented in a plenary session. Participants were then divided into three thematic groups (context and diagnosis, strategic direction, and implementing strategy) to scrutinize the document for improvement. In a final plenary, reports on groups’ work were presented and clarifications were brought to concerns raised.

At the end of the meeting, participants unanimously praised the quality and relevance of the strategy document and officially endorsed it. The next step in principle will be its adoption by the Cabinet before its implementation on the ground.

Application review meeting on Confined Field Trials of genetically modified Cassava and Sensitization meeting for institutional lawyers in Rwanda

AUDA-NEPAD is sustaining its support to Rwanda on the establishment of functional biosafety regulatory system in order to ensure safe management of modern biotechnology. In response to the request from Rwanda Environment Management Authority (REMA) for technical guidance from AUDA-NEPAD - ABNE in the development of

administrative tools and review of applications for confined field trials of genetically modified cassava brown streak disease (CBSD) & cassava mosaic disease (CMD) resistant cassava, technical support was provided to REMA and its National Biosafety Committee (NBC) in a 3-day meeting, which held from 4 to 6 February, 2020 and a 1-day awareness creation and sensitization meeting was also held, on 7 February 2020 for institutional lawyers relevant to the enactment process, both in Park Inn Kigali, Rwanda.



Group picture of participants during the meeting.

Technical support provided to REMA resulted in the finalization and adoption of some administrative tools for biosafety processes, which were developed in line with international best practices and obligations. The technical backstopping provided during CFT application review meeting of the 16 member NBC ensured the successful review of the application to conduct CFT of CBSD & CMD resistant cassava. The NBC found the proposed trial to be a low risk activity, having an acceptable level of risk for Rwanda, and recommended its approval by REMA, provided risk management conditions are implemented to reduce the likelihood of harm.

The awareness creation and sensitization of seventeen (17) institutional lawyers improved their understanding of biosafety processes and their

responsibilities as lawyers to that effect; improved their awareness on regulatory issues pertaining to GM foods; and helped equip them with requisite information that empowers them to participate in the biosafety law enactment process and respond to related public queries.

Remarks delivered on behalf of the Director General of REMA restated immense gratitude of the government of Rwanda, for the support provided towards creating an enabling environment for safely harnessing modern biotechnology and re-emphasized the political will and commitment from Rwanda government for the biosafety process. AUDA-NEPAD should, therefore, ensure further support is provided to strengthen institutional capacity in every aspect of the biosafety process, in order to ensure national competence, assuage public fears and instil public confidence in the national regulatory system.



African Biosafety Network of Expertise

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