



Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology in Africa (OFAB)

Launch of the Nairobi Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology in Africa

Nairobi, Kenya, 14 September 2006

Background

At the turn of this century, biotechnology emerged as a powerful tool that has contributed to increased agricultural productivity in many countries. Since 1996, biotechnology-derived crops have been commercially planted and their adoption has been increasing steadily; they are now planted by over 8.5 million farmers in 21 countries and cover over 90 million hectares. (ISAAA 2006) Eleven countries growing these crops are from the developing world, for example Brazil.

The intense debate over agricultural biotechnology and its application focuses mainly on hypothetical risks and questions related to value, safety and impact (agronomic, economic and environmental). However, the last ten years have seen many of these questions put to rest. Numerous studies and evidence-based fact finding missions have shown that biotechnology-derived products have been proven to be economically viable, environmentally sustainable and as safe as their conventional counterparts.

Most African countries are reluctant to adopt biotechnology-derived products as the policy makers are confronted with contradictory sources of information. Scientific facts are often mixed with social, ethical and political considerations. In the face of a rapidly growing population, declining agricultural productivity and reduced resources available for agricultural research, policy makers are pressed to make the right decisions and are looking for guidance. A case in point is the establishment of the High-Level African Panel on Modern Biotechnology set up by the African Union to advise the African Heads of State on a common stand on biotechnology. At the country level, there is need for national scientists and experts to provide policy makers and the general public with evidence-based information needed to harness such technologies.

As an African organisation set up to access and deliver proprietary technologies, including biotechnology, to increase the productivity of African smallholder farmers, the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) seeks to establish a platform that will facilitate the flow of information from the scientific community to policy makers and the general public. The platform, to be known as the **Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology in Africa**, will bring together stakeholders in biotechnology and enable interactions between scientists, journalists, the civil society, industrialists, lawmakers and policy makers. The Open Forum will take the form of a monthly lunch meeting that will provide an opportunity for key stakeholders to know one another, share knowledge and experiences, make new contacts and explore new avenues of bringing the benefits of biotechnology to the African agricultural sector. The Open Forum will provide an opportunity to make formal presentations or informal discussions focussing on the relationships between science,

technology, innovation, environmental protection, policy, trade, social benefits sharing and their impact on economic development.

The first Open Forum will be launched in Nairobi, Kenya on 14 September 2006. Nairobi is an ideal venue to launch this Open Forum as it has many universities and research institutions conducting research in the life sciences, development organisations, UN agencies, agricultural industries, farmer associations and civil society organisations. Participants in the Forum will be encouraged to be actively involved through proposition of guest speakers and topics for discussion. They will also be encouraged to provide evidence-based information materials.

Event description

The Open Forum will be an opportunity to share knowledge and experience, exchange views on complex issues, while respecting each other's opinion. The programme will be light and include one main speaker followed by a moderated discussion to allow time for socialising. Attendance will be by invitation. Discussions will be topical and presentations will be based on particular problems identified in the wider area of agriculture, technological innovation, food security and poverty reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is expected that these meetings will be a good source of information for all, especially the media. Facilitation of media briefing sessions by the speakers will form part and parcel of the meetings, and scheduled speakers will be encouraged to prepare for media discussions through provision of newsworthy information and participation in media interviews.

Frequency and venue of meeting

The Open Forum lunch meetings will be held monthly. It is suggested that a fixed day of the month be selected. The venue of subsequent meetings of the Forum is proposed as the Jacaranda Hotel, Westlands in Nairobi, Kenya.