

## Shun biotechnology at your own peril, scientist warns | Checkbiotech

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By Duncan Mboya

**Tired of not seeing action, African scientists have issued a stern warning to their governments: adopt modern technologies in agricultural production or forget about reducing poverty and disease in your midst.**

The warning comes barely seven years to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) deadline, whose goal one is to halve the number of those immersed in poverty and hunger eradication by 2015.

“Africa is a struggling continent with low agricultural yields compared to any part of the world hence making it impossible to achieve the goal,” said the Chairman of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) Dr. Clive James.

Amplifying James sentiments, Kenya’s agriculture secretary Dr. Wilson Songa cautioned African policy makers and stakeholders to stop thinking that Africa can produce enough food through organic technology alone in solving the food insecurity in the continent.

“We must adopt all the available technologies if we have to feed our people and have surplus for export,” he says.

Dr James observes that due to Africa’s unique wants, there is need to incorporate both conventional and new technologies to reverse the current hunger trends.

James observes that even though biotechnology has a major stake in increasing food productivity and security in the world, other techniques of producing food are equally important.

The slow pace at which African countries are adopting biotechnology is raising concern among the scientific community who cite it as one of the major drawbacks towards food sufficiency.

“Lack of political will and slow deliberation on biosafety legislation is the main stumbling block towards realizing Africa’s agricultural potential,” says Dr James.

He hailed Kenya’s move in putting biosafety law in place adding that the move makes Kenya the leading country in East African region to adopt the technology.

To date only Egypt, Zambia, South Africa, Burkina Faso, Mali and Kenya are the only African countries to have fully operational law on biotechnology.

Scientists’ argue that with the commercialization of biotechnology, poverty can be a thing of the past in many countries in sub Saharan Africa.

They claim that in the past 12 years that the technology has been in use, farmer’s income has increased by 34 billion dollars. ‘

Farmers in South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, China and India are now reaping the benefits of the technology, indicating that Kenya and other countries could also benefit,” James adds.

Studies done in India and South Africa show cotton and maize farmers, majority of them women from India and South Africa have benefited greatly after their governments adopted biotechnology.

Of the 4,000 families in villages where the *Bacellelus Thurengiensis* (Bt) cotton are grown, majority of those whose quality of life has improved are women.

Farmers’ income as increased by 220 US dollars, with yields increasing by 31 per cent. “Prenatal attendance, school enrolment and vaccination of children have improved compared to days before the introduction of the bt crops,” he says.

With close to 80 percent of the work on African farms being done by women, scientists believe the biotechnology will have more impact on them than any other sections of the population.

New biotechnology products that are likely to emerge in the near future have the potential of turning around the agricultural landscape in Africa.

With right policy guidelines in place, the key beneficiaries are expected to be women. Scientists say the first drought tolerant maize that will be unveiled in the United States of America in 2011 is expected to make a major shift in agricultural revolution in areas that are deemed unfit for agricultural productivity.

According to Kenya’s Secretary for National Council of Science and Technology (NCST) Prof. Shaukat Abdulrazak embracing biotechnology requires doing things differently and turning impossibilities to possibilities.

Prof. Abdulrazak says Kenya has developed guidelines to handle genetically modified requests.

He says that a renewed global effort that would enable countries prepares national biosafety and harmonized regional guidelines and regulations in using biotechnology is a bold move towards implementing the MDGs.

The Director of West Africa Biosciences Network (WABNet) Prof. Diran Makinde observes that countries within the same agro-ecological zone need to harmonize their biotechnology policies and also do a joint research to enable them save money and time.

He notes that the fact that Africa has few experts on biosafety and biotechnology that are capable of developing policy and laws, it is advisable that neighbouring countries team up and borrow from each other.

“Let countries that have not started work on biosafety regulations study share with countries that are already ahead in this area,” he adds.

He told African governments to stop borrowing funds from donors for the construction of

laboratories when such laboratories exist in neighbouring countries.

“AU leaders must significantly increase public investments in biotechnology research and development. Failure to do so will impair the continent’s capacity to stay connected to global advances in biotechnology and to transfer, adapt and exploit life sciences knowledge for the benefit of all citizens,” he notes.

Prof. Makinde observes that Africa needs to develop its own scientific capacity to assess biotechnology-related risks through national, regional, and continental institutions.

Governments should therefore seek to advance in improving regional cooperation in science and technology in the use of biotechnology by facilitating the approval of trials done by regional countries.

“It is true that a country like Kenya is ahead in the biotechnology development in the East African region. It will be better if neighbouring countries borrowed ideas from them rather than start from scratch,’ he says.

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