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WIPO grants AATF observer status and signs MoU for intellectual property collaboration



Dr Jacob Mignouna, AATF Technical Operations Director (left) and Dr Francis Gurry, Director General of WIPO, exchange the signed agreements.

The World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) has accepted AATF as a permanent international NGO observer. The status was granted by the General Assembly of WIPO on 22 September 2010. This status will allow AATF to offer constructive and substantive contributions to the deliberations of the Assemblies of WIPO. AATF will also have authority to speak on behalf of those it represents.

The two organisations signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on 24 September 2010. Based on the MoU, AATF and WIPO could work on a road map to establish the AATF as a Technology and Innovation Support Center for AATF's stakeholders including the national agricultural research organisations (NARS) from Africa.

The MoU covers provision by WIPO of free technology landscape reports, patent legal status searches and capacity building assistance to AATF.

The MoU therefore lays ground for carrying out joint consultations and activities such as organising of training seminars for both AATF staff and stakeholders on the subjects of intellectual property

(IP) and technology transfer.

This new partnership creates opportunity to ensure that the IP system serves as a stimulus for arriving at solutions to global challenges confronting policy makers across the globe such as food insecurity.

The two organisations recognise that intellectual property has the ability to drive innovation, creativity and transfer of technology. They also note that there is need to ensure that

the IP system produces social and economic benefits.

Dr Francis Gurry, Director General of WIPO, signed the MoU on behalf of his organisation while Dr Jacob Mignouna, Technical Operations Director AATF, signed for the Foundation.

WIPO is a specialised agency of the United Nations. It is dedicated to developing a balanced and accessible international intellectual property system which rewards creativity, stimulates innovation and contributes to economic development while safeguarding the public interest. ■

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Ms Irene Kitsara, the Project Co-ordinator, Patent Information Service at WIPO, consults with Mr Alhaji Tejan-Cole, AATF Legal Counsel, when she visited AATF following the signing of the AATF/WIPO MoU.

BXW-resistant bananas planted in CFTs

Confined field trials to evaluate banana plants for resistance to banana bacterial wilt (BXW) have been planted in Uganda. The trials are being carried out by the Uganda National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) and the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA), following approval by the Uganda National Biosafety Committee earlier in the year and preparation of the trial site in line with regulatory guidelines.

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Planting of GM banana in a confined field trial (CFT) at Kawanda.

Capacity strengthening for WEMA



A section of the participants at one of the workshops.

The Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) partners organised a series of training workshops and study tours between September and October 2010 in the areas of regulatory management, irrigation, intellectual property management and communication to enhance the capacity and confidence of the teams to manage key aspects of the project.

In early September, members of WEMA regulatory and product development teams visited Canada for practical experience of the country's regulatory processes. The team was taken through the Canadian regulatory system which they found to be flexible, coordinated and consultative. Participants learnt that the system operates through shared responsibility, and that early planning, confidence building of

regulators to encourage public trust and inclusion of pre-consultation meetings between applicants and regulators was key to the success of the country's regulatory system. The team noted this as a model worth emulating in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The soil, water and irrigation management training targeting confined field trial site managers and product development team members was facilitated by irrigation experts from the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre, Monsanto and PADULA Partners Irrigation Company of France. The training focused on irrigation equipment maintenance and drought management and included both theory and practical aspects.

The intellectual property (IP) training aimed at building a common understanding among

participants about the IP aspects of the WEMA project. IP and legal experts from CIMMYT, Monsanto and AATF discussed with project partners issues related to copyright, patents and plant variety protection.

The risk communication, issue and message management training took the participants through the challenges of communicating about agricultural technology and how to best manage communication around issues that may arise in the project. Practical sessions on message development and how to respond during crisis were facilitated by Jill Kuehnert of Seed Stories and AATF staff. ■

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Participants on a maize field tour in Canada.

Media acknowledged as key catalyst in biotechnology communication



Participants at the media workshop

Dissemination of correct information was noted as a key factor in ensuring that the public receives the right information to help them in decision-making. This was the subject of discussion during a media workshop to discuss how best to communicate agricultural biotechnology. The workshop was held on 19 October, 2010 in Abuja, Nigeria.

The workshop discussed biotechnology as a tool that can contribute towards sustainable food security in the face of adverse climatic conditions and challenges faced by farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa. It also explored various ways in which the media can communicate agricultural biotechnology and educate people on technology transfer. Discussions revolved around technology access, product development, the legislative framework and effective communication to contribute towards public awareness and support product deployment to farmers.

The workshop was organised by AATF in collaboration with Nigeria's National Biotechnology Development Agency (NABDA), the Agricultural Research Council of Nigeria (ARCN) and the Institute of Agricultural Research (IAR). Some of the speakers included Hon. Gbenga Makanjuola, Hon. J.O. Awoniyi of Primera Agriculture, Prof. B.O. Solomon of NABDA, and Diran Onifade of the Guild of Editors Nigeria. ■

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AATF and IITA discuss possible collaboration on cassava mechanisation

IITA and AATF recently met in Nairobi in November 2010 to discuss how the two organisations could collaborate on cassava mechanisation. The discussions were initiated by IITA under its Unleashing the Power of Cassava (UPoCA) project that seeks value-addition and commercialisation of cassava in Africa.

Dr Jacob Mignouna, AATF Technical Operations Director, welcomed the IITA team saying the discussions were timely since cassava mechanisation fitted within the AATF priority areas. Jacob said that cassava processing constituted one of the key farmer constraints to be addressed by AATF in their quest to address food security for smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

According to Dr James Braima, Manager of the UPoCA Project IITA-Sierra Leone, two key bottlenecks to realising the full potential of cassava especially at commercialisation is lack of affordable and cost effective drying and peeling technologies in rural areas which, he says, could be addressed through



Braima James (third left), Richardson Okechukwu (in African attire) and Samuel Edmond Nonie (extreme right) with AATF staff after the meeting.

the set-up of microprocessing centers equipped with efficient machines and supported by farm clusters. James indicated that his team and partners had made promising progress in addressing this area and would be keen to work with AATF to scale up and encourage wider uptake and adoption. ■

Prof Sithole-Niang is new AATF Board Chair



Professor Idah Sithole-Niang' was elected by the AATF Board of Trustees as its next Board Chair effective January 2011. Idah takes over from Prof Walter Alhassan who served as Chair since November 2008. Idah joined the AATF Board in 2009 and was Chair of the Nominations Committee. She is an Associate Professor and Head of Department at the University of Zimbabwe's Department of Biochemistry, which she joined in 1992. She teaches molecular biology and her research work focuses on cowpea crop improvement. Idah also serves on the Oversight Committee of the Improved Maize for African Soils (IMAS), and is Vice Chairperson of the Research Council of Zimbabwe. She is also the Vice Chairperson of the Steering Committee of the African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD). Idah is Technical Advisor for the Program for Biosafety Systems, is a member of the Steering Committee of the Public Research and Regulation Initiative (PRRI) as well as the Steering Committee on Crops for the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Prof Sithole-Niang spoke of her plans for AATF and below are excerpts of that interview.

What will be your key areas of attention as Board Chair?

The key role of the Board is to ensure successful operation and efficient governance of the organisation by making sure that its activities are consistent with its mission, that it is effectively managed and that the future wellbeing of AATF is not jeopardised. As Board Chair, I will contribute to the successful accomplishment of this role

by providing effective leadership to the Board, upholding AATF's integrity and safeguarding its assets. I will also encourage effective engagement with partners to ensure realisation of project goals and deployment of the products already in the pipeline. I will encourage management to take advantage of the wide ranging synergistic efforts that have been put in place in order to partner more effectively and realise more gains on the investments made. Further, I am keen to provide the Executive Director with the necessary support to accomplish the duties of his office. My special interest will be in supporting management maintain good relations with AATF donors and build on its current funding.

What are some of the key constraints to moving Africa's agriculture forward and what can be done about it?

Sadly this is still a long list, one including but not limited to: poor soils, drought, limited access to improved varieties, lack of irrigation facilities, poor water harvesting and management, high pest and disease incidence, low mechanisation, poor research and extension, and ineffective government policy on agriculture.

I believe Africa can make a difference in its agricultural development if it espouses some of the key technologies that could effectively make a difference, keep the smallholder farmer central to the discussions and aim to improve their livelihoods.

What are some of the key strengths of AATF as a contributor to Africa's agriculture?

The ability to facilitate public-private partnerships for access and delivery of appropriate technologies to the resource-poor smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa is a key strength. AATF is seen as the 'go-to-organisation' for technology access and transfer which is a brand that must be upheld. I would like to point out that AATF has enormous professional expertise in key areas of technology

transfer. These professionals have demonstrated commitment to their work and the results speak for themselves and this, to me, is a key strength for the organisation. I believe that the Board of Trustees is a key asset for the Foundation. It brings together a mix of membership that brings varied experience, international and specialised expertise and personal commitment that continuously contributes to AATF's work.

The current donors are also a major strength for the organisation especially their commitment to the realisation of AATF goals. These donors have provided valued advice and guidance that continues to shape AATF as it grows. I also feel that the kind of projects that AATF is currently implementing provide a healthy mix of portfolio that attends to different interests as it includes different technologies such as biotechnology, conventional, mechanical and chemical. AATF is slowly growing its geographic coverage of Sub-Saharan Africa as it has projects in eastern, southern and western Africa and I look forward to further developments.

Where do you see African agriculture going?

While agriculture might have reached a crossroad, a lot of effort is being put in place to mainstream activities through regional initiatives, as such I am optimistic that African agriculture will turn around and take its rightful place as the economic mainstay of many countries. We have witnessed growing high-level attention to agricultural development issues and this cannot be in vain especially where over 70% of our populations depend on agriculture for their livelihoods.

Do you have a message for AATF stakeholders?

This is indeed a fitting time to send good wishes to all AATF partners and associates during the 2010 festive season. This has been a busy year for all of us. May 2011 be a fruitful and successful year for all. ■