

Biotechnology forum launched in Uganda, December 14, 2007

A monthly forum to facilitate the flow of information between the scientific community, policy makers and the general public has been launched in Kampala, Uganda. The Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB), Uganda Chapter, was launched on December 14 at a Kampala hotel.

Speaking while formally inaugurating the Forum, Hon Eng Hillary Onek, the Minister of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries said that biotechnology provides practical answers to some of the greatest challenges mankind faces at the dawn of a new millennium, such as hunger and malnutrition. He observed that biotechnology is an accessible and exciting new development that is already improving the way people live.

Hon Eng Onek called upon Uganda to embrace and apply modern science and technology in farming, saying that countries that have embraced modern agricultural technologies, have improved economic performance, reduced poverty and ensured greater food security for their people.

Hon Dr Kibirige Sebunya, Minister of State, Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries underscored the need for a Ministry of Science and Technology saying that OFAB's host, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), cannot operate optimally under the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.

The UNCST has developed a Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy that is due for presentation to the cabinet. According to the Executive Secretary, Dr Peter Ndemere, the policy will provide an overall framework for regulation of Modern Biotechnology products in Uganda. A draft bill that will expand UNCST's mandate beyond research regulation to include commercialisation of GMOs is in preliminary stages.

The guest speaker, Mr Mark Cantley, Former Science Adviser for the European Commission, urged African nations to define their own needs and priorities rather than following an agenda dictated by other parties. Mr Cantley observed that a coordinated national strategy is desirable for advancing a country's interests in the use of modern biotechnology, a state hampered by a lack of political will.

Giving his remarks, Dr Mpoko Bokanga, the Executive Director, African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) challenged Africans to overcome the unfounded fears of genetically modified foods. He said that decisions regarding the adoption of new technologies must be guided by informed choices based upon knowledge of local priorities, opportunities offered by such technologies, expected benefits and ability to manage risks.

In reference to OFAB, Dr Bokanga reiterated AATF's commitment to provide a platform where the critical mass of knowledge in different African countries can be accessed by policy and law makers, journalists and the general public.

The event was also addressed by Dr Charles Mugoya, Program Manager, Agrobiodiversity and Biotechnology, Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in East and Central Africa (ASARECA) who decried the lengthy policy formulation processes saying this was the greatest impediment to the use of biotechnology in Africa.

The Forum brought together parliamentarians, scientists, journalists, the civil society, and policy makers. The Director General National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO), Dr Dennis Kyetere, moderated the discussions.

OFAB is an initiative of the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF). In Uganda, the initiative is implemented in collaboration with UNCST and the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) in partnership with NARO and ASARECA.

The initiative is a response to the need for better understanding of a range of products, benefits and concerns associated with biotechnology. The Forum provides an opportunity for exchange of information and encourages factual discussions on the issue of agricultural biotechnology.

A similar forum was inaugurated in Nairobi, Kenya in September 2006.

For further information contact:

Arthur Makara
Senior Science Officer (Biosafety)
Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST)
Tel: 256-414-705500
uncst@starcom.co.ug

OR

Nancy Muchiri
AATF Communication and Partnerships Manager
Tel: 254 20 4223700 or 735 992 206
E-mail: n.muchiri@aatf-africa.org