

FARMERS WELCOME BIOTECHNOLOGY, WANT MORE INFORMATION FROM SCIENTISTS & GOVERNMENT

The Uganda National Farmers Federation (UNFFE) in partnership with Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) organised a policy dialogue on Biotechnology and Biosafety on the 18th of July 2008 at the farmer's center (UNFFE headquarters) in Nakasero, Kampala.

Though a lot of effort has been put in by the UNCST to engage stakeholders during the process of development of the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy, there is still a lot of mis-information and low public awareness about issues contained in the policy.

This is also the case with the subsequent draft Biosafety Bill that is still undergoing further improvement and stakeholder-consultations.

In 2003, a number of district consultations were conducted by the UNCST in different districts including Kasese, Mpigi, Masaka, Kamuli, Gulu, and Kampala among others on these matters. It has however been a long time since these grassroot consultations were made. On April 2, 2008, the Cabinet of Uganda approved the National Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy—a state process under the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development.

The main objective of the July Farmers' policy dialogue was to have a wide and harmonized engagement of the cross-section of farmers from different parts of Uganda, on matters of Biotechnology upon which they were updated on recent developments in the Biotechnology applications and regulatory process in Uganda. Also, their views were solicited on the current biotechnology and biosafety policy and legal processes.

The Theme of the Dialogue was: Underpinning farmer's transformation through adoption of farm enhancement technologies. Key speakers present included Dr. Peter Ndemere, the Executive Secretary of the UNCST—the Competent Authority in spearheading the formulation of and consensus building for the policy and law on Biotechnology and Biosafety. Others speakers were Mr. Jan Dewal the executive director of VECO Uganda, Hon. Frank Tumwebaze, Member of Parliament and the President of UNFFE; Mr. Onya Akonopesa, the Vice-President UNFFE; Mrs Victoria Kakooko Sebagereka, UNFFE's Publicity Secretary/chairperson of Lobby and Advocacy Committee and Mr. Morrison Rwakakamba, the Manager Policy, Research and Advocacy at UNFFE.

The Biotechnologists present to inform farmers of the application and status of biotechnology in Uganda were Dr. Andrew Kiggundu and Dr. Geoffrey Arinaitwe of National Agricultural Research Laboratories Institute under the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) at Kawanda. The scientists explained the process of gene transfer to make genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or transgenics in the simplest manner possible.

Dr. Kiggundu's presentation

earned him a following most markedly from the farmers' representative from West Nile.

The farmers had various concerns ranging from the likelihood of GM crops being already present in the country, to the possible negative effects of consuming GMOs like death. Mr. Musango Jotham, from Bushenyi, wondered why there was so much negative publicity on GMOs from some NGOs in Uganda yet bodies such as NARO and the UNCST were in possession of reliable information countering such claims but do not speak. "Pull up your socks and come to the ground," he advised.

The need for more information so as to make informed decisions and take informed positions on the matter of GMOs came out clearly from the participants.

A forum, such as was taking place, had been long in coming. The issue of organic farming offering a better opportunity (competitive advantage) for Uganda as opposed to GMOs was raised by Mr. Ronald Naluwairo of Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE). This was in line with a press statement previously issued by ACODE in June, 2008 against GMOs.

At the dialogue, it was generally appreciated that though the motivation for organic farming was good, it is really only practical for small-scale production; one tea grower raised this concern.

Dr. Arinaitwe—the scientist who developed a GM banana at the Katholek University of Leuven (KUL) in Belgium in 2004, further asked the farmers to consider the size of the commonly referred to niche market for organic produce; was it really sufficient and sustainable to fully indulge the country as a whole in organic farming? On "Whether GMOs are organic," Dr. Arinaitwe informed participants, "since genes are the molecules of life, strictly speaking GMOs are organic. This though is not the conventional thinking worldwide as anti-GM lobbyists think and say organic is exclusive of GMOs.

The national legal instrument, called the Biosafety Bill is expected to cater for issues such as bio-fuels and ethical guidelines for gene transfers.

The forum ended with a presentation from Mrs. Victoria Kakooko Sebagereka on what farmers expect from the scientists and the government at large.

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Participants at the dialogue