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18 October 2006 | News



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~~Dr Idah Sithole-Niang, PBS Regional Coordinator for Southern Africa~~

~~The Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to assist developing countries to enhance biosafety policy, research, and capacity. The PBS is run by a consortium of professionals and institutions with a high level of knowledge in biosafety program and policy development in developing countries. In a chat with BioSpectrum, Dr Idah Sithole-Niang elaborates on the strides made by the South African region in the biotech arena.~~

What is the status of modern biotechnology in South Africa? How successful are the modern biotech crops?

In South Africa, GM research started in 1982, and over 500 field trials have been conducted so far. Till date the country has commercialized five GM products-Bt cotton, Bt maize, Bt yellow and white maize, herbicide tolerant round up ready soyabean, and the latest in the series is round up ready bollgard. The round up ready bollgard, which has the stacked genes for resistance in cotton, was approved last year. All these products have been developed by large multinational companies in the US and now there are hybrid varieties with these traits locally available in the South African market. The country has developed biotechnology research innovation centers and research platforms, which are new efforts to coordinate biosafety to support biotech R&D.

What are the issues and challenges facing the spread of biotechnology in the African region?

Some of the important concerns in the region include:

- South Africa is the only country out of 53 countries in Africa to commercialize Bt products. Egypt has had four products ready since 2002, but there is perceived market pressure which persists.
- Time taken for commercialization is long and costs are high due to biosafety regulatory requirements.
- In the South African region, there is ambivalence towards genetically modified products, while the food security is still threatened.
- There is a need for creating awareness about biotechnology to the public, policy and decision-makers.
- There is a need for building national strategies, fostering sub-regional cooperation and public-private sector partnerships. In addition, there is a requirement for developing policies to guide and create an enabling environment for regulatory, institutional, legal and technology transfer issues.
- Capacity building and infrastructure; brain-drain, mobility and gain; limited funding and GM research on orphan crops are some of the other important challenges.

From a policy perspective, how are the countries equipped to handle modern biotechnology in the African region?

Of the 41 African countries, 29 have signed the Cartagena Protocol, while 24 have ratified it. The current status of biotechnology legislation in the region is as follows: In Namibia there is a biotechnology policy and they are finalizing their National Biosafety Framework. Along with Namibia, Cameroon, Kenya and Uganda are in the implementation phase as part of a group of eight countries worldwide. Zambia has a biotech strategy and it is now looking at a legal framework to implement. Zimbabwe and South Africa already have laws and are implementing them. Simultaneously both these countries are reviewing the existing biosafety frameworks. Malawi and Mauritius have the required legislation, although Malawi is now reviewing the Biosafety Act and developing a Biotech Policy. Lesotho is finalizing the draft policy and bill; the bill at Swaziland is in development; Moza through GIIBS are finalizing their draft bill. Tanzania has a draft interim biosafety framework. It is now finalizing its draft and getting ready for Bt cotton trials. Botswana has a Draft Biosafety Bill, which it is fine tuning and the case of Mozambique is also similar.

How is your organization facilitating the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS)?

The Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) is global. It is a consortium of biosafety experts and in Asia we work in Indonesia and the Philippines, while in Africa we work in three regions-West Africa, East Africa and the Southern Africa. In Southern Africa, the PBS is in Malawi assisting in fine-tuning their regulations and the policy development. We are at present assisting conduct of confined field trials for transgenic cassava resistant to African cassava mosaic virus. This component within PBS is run out of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Washington and is funded by the USAID. The PBS has other components like the BBI-Biotechnology Biodiversity Interface, which is a competitive grant program that will run every year in the whole of Africa, Indonesia and the Philippines for risk assessment research. Concurrent to that, there is a component on biosafety/food safety training in which the Michigan State University, US is assisting. The university helps in training both in Asia and Africa. There is another component on the regulatory approval strategies.

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