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REPORT OF THE WEST AFRICAN MEDIA WORKSHOP

EFFECTIVE COVERAGE OF THE THIRD ECOWAS MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON
BIOTECHNOLOGY

APRIL 2007

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CONFERENCE ON BIOTECHNOLOGY

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Report of the West African Media workshop

Effective Coverage of the Third ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology

Accra, Ghana 25-26 March 2007



APRIL 2007

1.0: INTRODUCTION

The training workshop, which was held from March 25-26, 2007, at the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) headquarters in Accra, Ghana, benefited about 23 journalists drawn from Anglophone and Francophone countries of West Africa, operating under the umbrella of Regional Agricultural Reporters' Network (RECOAB).

The main objective of the training was to equip the media with necessary skills for effective coverage of biotechnology during and after the Third Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology, also held in Ghana from 27-30 March 2007. The FARA/PBS Coordinator for West Africa, Prof Walter Alhassan, started the workshop off by welcoming the participants and presenters before giving an overview of the workshop.



He said the training was to prepare the media for the ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology and also to update them on progress made by the annual conference since the first one was held in Burkina Faso in 2004. The participants included senior science reporters, editors and experts from both electronic and print media who were drawn from Benin, Burkina Faso Chad Cote d'Ivoire The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

The meeting was also attended by representatives of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), FARA and African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF). Several information, education and communication materials on biotechnology were distributed to the journalists to deepen their knowledge on the subject. Of particular interest were the ISAAA Global Report on Commercialized Biotech Crops 2006, the Pocket Ks and a Handbook on Effective Coverage of Biotechnology.

This was the second of such capacity building workshops jointly organized by FARA and PBS with support from USAID.

2.0: PRESENTATIONS

2.1. Introduction to Genes-structure, function and use in modern agriculture

Mrs Elizabeth Parkes of the Crop Research Institute of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) took participants through an introduction of gene structure, its functions and exploitation in modern agriculture. She made her presentation more practical by using ropes with pegs to demonstrate and explain the DNA structure.

2.2. Introduction to biotechnology: Definitions, benefits and risks

Prof Samuel Kwame Offei of the Biotechnology Department of the University of Ghana focused on the definition and application of biotechnology in agriculture. He allayed fears over safety of transgenic products, saying they were the most rigorously tested for side effects, such as allergens and for impact on the environment.

Emerging issues

The presentation elicited heated debate whose highlights were as follows:

- That rural Africa was still populated by many illiterate or semi-literate farmers who require biotech information into local languages.
- That the farmers in most countries in West Africa had heard about biotechnology and were raising safety questions that should be addressed to avoid a backlash against the technology in the region.
- The journalists wondered whether transgenic crops can eliminate the need for fertilizer application on crops.
- That separating GM feed and food would be a daunting task for poor African countries
- That the West was so much a head of Africa in terms of biotech R&D and application and that this would lead to the continent being a passive consumer.

2.2.1. Response

Dr Offei concurred that myths about biotechnology should be debunked through awareness creation and knowledge-sharing. He challenged the media in the region to play their part by first seeking to understand the technology so that they could give accurate and balanced information. The professor said that African scientists had the capacity to undertake research on biotechnology to produce products for the benefit of Africa.

2.3. Biotechnology Case Studies: Bt Cotton in India and Bt Maize in South Africa

Two documentaries were shown to enable the media to understand and appreciate the process of developing a transgenic crop, also to understand the benefits as narrated by the farmers.

The two videos cover a wide range of topics, including research and development, patenting, regulatory affairs, policy, safety, benefits and perceived risks. Professor Alhassan led the workshop in discussing the video presentations.

The following were some of the key observations made and lessons learnt by the participants.

2.3.1. *Bt Cotton*

- That many insect pests attack cotton apart from Bollworm therefore farmers need to control such pests too despite adoption of the *Bt Cotton*. However, Bollworm is the most economically important cotton pest.
- That *Bt Cotton* require less pesticides compared to the conventional one.
- That use of *Bt* in agriculture was not new as *Bt* insecticides or pesticides have been available although their efficacy has not been as good as when the gene is inserted into the plant.
- That public-private partnership among Mahyco Limited, Monsanto and CSIR of India helped to successfully introduce *Bt Cotton* into the country.
- That *Bt Cotton* was the first transgenic crop to be commercialized in India. It was a strategic move because *Bt* cotton is not a food crop and therefore less controversial
- That the *Bt* gene was not expressed in cotton oil
- That many farmers were happy with *Bt Cotton* because it gave them higher returns of about 20-50 percent more yields compared to the conventional seed cotton. However, farmers who planted counterfeit seeds and were making losses.
- That it takes a long process to release a GM crop for commercialization. The efficacy and biosafety tests were rigorous and numerous.

2.3.2. *Bt Maize*

- That RSA grows both yellow and white *Bt Maize*
- That yields were higher than the conventional ones by 25 percent
- That *Bt Maize* were fortified against the stem-borer, the most economically important pest.
- That many farmers were happy with the new technology because it had been proved to be safe and beneficial
- That it took goodwill from the public, media and politicians for a country to successfully release transgenic crops to farmers
- That awareness creation through knowledge-sharing was critical to technology transfer
- That technical capacity at country-level was crucial for research, development and deployment of the technology.
- That biotech crops were only supplementing the conventional ones and that farmers had a choice on what seeds to buy.

Some of the issues raised were addressed to the satisfaction of the participants who wished that African countries would adopt the technology to improve agriculture and fight poverty and hunger on the continent.

2.4. Trade implications of GMO products development for Africa

Mr. Samuel Timpo of Biotechnology Nuclear and Agricultural Research Institute led the workshop in understanding trade-related issues of biotechnology. He challenged African leaders to ensure that their experts were fully prepared to handle trade negotiations. He said

African traders suffered a lot in overseas markets because of lack of support by their foreign missions. He called for a stronger African voice in the WTO, especially during trade talks.

2.4.1. Emerging Issues

The presentation raised a lot of interest as evidenced by the following:

- The issue of benefit-sharing needs to be addressed
- What are the trade implications for Africa if we were to adopt biotech crops?
- We need fair trade policies by WTO: Africa only contributes two percent of world trade and this could shrink further if we adopt biotech crops as it would hamper trade with the EU states.
- Farm subsidies should be eliminated by the rich nations for African farm products to compete favourably in the international commodity market

2.4.2. Response

The journalists were challenged to prompt African countries through reporting to grow enough food to meet the growing needs of its population. It was noted that Europe does not need grains from Africa as they had surplus productions. Ensuring food security in Africa was recognized as more important than trade with developed countries. The need to strengthen regional trade was underscored.

2.5. Communicating biotechnology issues through the press: Ensuring objectivity in reporting

The role of the media in ensuring objectivity in reporting was addressed by veteran journalists Mrs Linda Asante Agyei of the Ghana News Agency and a Coordinator for the Network of West Africa Communicators on Biotechnology, Anglophone Chapter, and Mrs Ama Kudom-Agyemang, an Environmental Communicator.

2.5.1. Ms Ama Kudom-Agyemang

Ms Kudom-Agyemang, a leading science journalist in Ghana, presented on challenges facing and opportunities available to the media reporting on biotechnology. She said that biotechnology was an evolving area of science, which presented and generated its own sets of stories that should continuously be told by the media. She observed that because of the ignorance that abounded in developing countries about the subject and the perceived dangers involving its application in agriculture, biotechnology stories were even more urgent.

However, some of the major challenges she identified were the difficulties faced by reporters in getting balanced stories, scientists and researchers unwilling to be interviewed and getting biotech stories published or aired. She advised the journalists to deal with biotechnology stories like any other issues. She emphasized the need for objectivity and professionalism to win the confidence of sources and audiences.

2.5.2. Mrs. Linda Asante Agyei

Mrs Agyei took participants through the tips for effective reporting on biotechnology. She urged them to always keep track of new developments by reading widely on the subject and networking with scientists and colleagues. She called for balanced reporting that captured the views from both sides of the biotechnology debate but based on facts not propaganda.

“Build rapport with scientists and leaders to gain their confidence and trust and join interest groups on biotechnology to get more story ideas,” she emphasized.

On tips of interviewing, she advised the journalists to always do a thorough background research on the topic before setting off for the interview. She told the journalists to always verify claims, ask for substantiation so that they can write credible, accurate and balanced stories.

2.6. Overview of the ECOWAS Ministerial meeting

Prof. Alhassan took participants through the highlights of the ministerial conferences held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and Bamako, Mali, in 2004 and 2005 respectively. The recommendations and the action plans were reviewed a head of the Third ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology that was later to be held in Accra, Ghana.

He explained that the Ouagadougou meeting discussed the modalities for providing a better understanding of biotechnology, its applications and the opportunities it had for African agriculture. The subsequent meeting in Bamako recommended the development of an action plan by the ECOWAS Commission on biotechnology and biosafety in the sub-region. Related policy guidelines were also issued at the meeting.

The Accra meeting was expanded to include ECOWAS Ministers responsible for Agriculture, Science and Environment who were to deliberate more on the action plan and adopt it. The action plan addressed areas such as cost and financial arrangements, the role and responsibilities of stakeholders, biotechnology and biosafety management or governance and the timetable for implementation.

2.6.1. Emerging Issues

The following issues were raised on the presentation.

- Is there a political will to adopt biotechnology in the region?
- Is the Ministerial Conference just another talking-shop?

2.6.2. Response

Prof Alhassan noted that the Accra meeting had high-level political support and expressed optimism that the action plan would be adopted. The action plan outlined the way forward in terms of funding, partnerships and projects to be implemented. However, he challenged the media to raise the same questions with the ministers during the conference.

2.7. Status of biotechnology in West Africa and Globally

2.7.1. Status of biotechnology in West Africa

Presenting the Status of Biotechnology in West Africa as at 2006, Prof. Alhassan said food and nutrition security remained Africa’s most fundamental challenges. He regretted that apart from Burkina Faso, none of the countries in the region was conducting trials on GM crops.

Prof Alhassan, the Coordinator of FARA/BPS in West Africa, said Burkina Faso authorities had turned the decree on biotechnology into law to enable them to successfully conduct trials on Bt Cotton. Consequently, the country may commercialize Bt Cotton by the year 2008.

Mali's biosafety decree was still awaiting Presidential assent. If signed into law, it will allow the country to introduce GM crops for field studies. Ghana's biosafety draft law was at the cabinet level while Nigeria was the only country in the sub-region with a national biotechnology policy and an almost completed biosafety policy.



Benin on the other hand had put a moratorium aimed at barring GM products from entering the country. However, the five-year ban was due to be lifted in April, according to Mr Dansou Gilles, a participant from the country. Prof. Alhassan said PBS had offered training to scientists in Ghana, Mali and Nigeria on how to conduct field trials on genetically modified crops that were likely to be introduced.

On the Global Status of Commercialized Biotech Crops, the FARA/PBS Coordinator said the world had entered the second decade in GM crops marked by rapid adoption by farmers, especially in developing countries. Quoting the ISAAA Global Report 2006 by Dr Clive James, he said, the United States of America, Brazil, India and South Africa were leading in adoption of biotech crops. A total of 22 countries grew biotech crops in 2006.

The global area of biotech crops continued to climb for the 10th consecutive year at a sustained double-digit growth rate of 13%, or 12 million hectares, reaching a record high of 102 million hectares. The number of farmers growing biotech crops exceeded 10 million. The accumulated hectareage from 1996 to 2006 exceeded half a billion hectares at 577 million. African countries such as Kenya, Burkina Faso and Egypt are expected to join the group of biotech growing countries in the second decade.

2.7.3. Emerging Issues

- Can biotech stakeholders sponsor programs on TV and radio to help create public awareness?
- How can the media assist in countering NGOs who are against biotechnology so that there would no more moratoriums?
- Editors also need to be sensitized on the importance of biotechnology because most of them are not aware of what it was.
- What are the tactics used by anti-biotech NGOs on the ground?

2.7.4. Responses

Prof Alhassan said the PBS was looking for funds which could be used for media campaigns and other outreach activities. Mr Cyr Payim of Burkina Faso reported that various organizations like ISAAA, USAID were willing to assist journalists to play their role in effective reporting of biotechnology.

He called on the journalists to get more organized and develop proposals that could be funded by donors and development partners. He gave an example of his country Burkina Faso where such partnerships had led to more capacity building opportunities for journalists and thus improved coverage of the technology.

On the tactics used by anti-GMO lobby groups, it was noted that they mainly depend on propaganda, use of local languages and hyped visual images. It was suggested that neutral and pro-biotech groups should be proactive and use simple language while communicating the technical subject.

3.0 FIELD EXCURSION

3.1. Biotechnology Nuclear and Agricultural Research Institute

The participants visited the Institute's Tissue Culture laboratories to learn more about micro-propagation. This enabled them to understand the benefits of modern biotechnology as the advantages of TC plantlets were explained in details. The institute works on TC Bananas, Pineapples, Yams, oranges, sweet potatoes, among others.



3.2. Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research

Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research was the next to be visited. Here, participants visited the Parasitology Department and other diagnostic and vaccine research laboratories. Participants appreciated the visits saying they were eye-openers to what goes on in terms of high-level research that they needed to tell their readers, listeners and viewers.



4.0. MOCK BIOTECH DEBATE

Participants tested their understanding of biotechnology issues with a mock debate on perceptions of Multi-national companies and their role in biotechnology activities in developing countries. They divided themselves into two groups: one pro and anti-multinationals.

Group 1 who spoke in support of the multinationals argued that local institutions should work closely with multi-nationals companies to tap their knowledge, funds and expertise for the benefit of their people. They said Africa could not afford to be left out on the on-going biotechnology revolution.

Group 2 on the other hand, spoke against the multi-nationals who, they said, were exploitative and were only out to kill Africa's traditional seed sector.

However, in the long run, it was agreed that the media in Africa should help the people and policy makers to understand the benefits of public-private sector partnerships. They called for more public awareness and education to demystify biotechnology.

5.0. WORKSHOP EVALUATION

At the end of the presentations, participants were given forms to evaluate the workshop. The majority, or 70 percent, said the field visit was the most helpful aspect of the workshop since it gave them opportunity to see first-hand how the technology was being applied to improve crops. About 95 percent of the respondents rated the workshop as very good and very useful. 75 percent the presenters' level of knowledge of subject was excellent.

Most participants said they would like to know more about the impact of biotechnology on trade. They also suggested that application of biotechnology in medicine be included in the next course. Biotechnology and poverty reduction, involvement of farmers in biotech programs, preparedness of researchers/scientists to communicate with journalists, sharing of knowledge and experiences in respective countries and more field trips topped the list of topics for future workshops.



6.0. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made:

1. Training be organized for senior media editors from the region to help them to be understand biotechnology and be appreciative of it
2. That ISAAA should partner with the media in the region to produce programs aimed at popularising the technology in West Africa.
3. That the training be extended to three days instead of two days to create more time for discussions and field visits
4. That local participants should be provided with accommodation to facilitate better networking and interactions.
5. That follow-up trainings should be regular and target the current participants to deepen better knowledge of modern biotechnology
6. That the presenters should be given enough time to cover more areas of the technology.
7. That RECOAB should be more proactive and seek to formally introduce themselves to the regional bodies and initiatives as the lead focal point for media events.

7.0. VOTE OF THANKS

The ISAAA AfriCenter Director, Dr Margaret Karembu, gave vote of thanks on behalf of organizers of the workshop. She thanked the participants and the organizers for successfully holding the two-day media workshop. Dr Karembu called on the journalists to support public-private partnerships to enable Africa to benefit from the knowledge-based, technology-driven agriculture.

The director observed that African countries should build capacities of their technocrats to handle complex international negotiations because resultant decisions bound all parties. She challenged the media to highlight such issues so that the policy makers could act on them. African scientists are able and willing to take up such challenges as mapping the continent's biodiversity and putting monetary value on them but were only lacking political will and financial support.

She called on the media to help demystify biotechnology so that policy makers could look at it more favourably. "African farmers need access to high quality seeds and information on best agricultural practices and the media are best placed to spread such information to the masses."

Dr Karembu noted that the training had done well in equipping the journalists with the necessary facts and figures on biotechnology that they should use to report accurately and authoritatively on the subject, especially during the Ministerial conference.

8.0. APPENDICES

8.1. Press coverage

Ghana Press

Business Week
Mar. 12 - 18, 07 *March 12-13, 2007*

www.businessweekafrica.com

NEWS

ECOWAS Biotech Meeting Slated for Accra

By Fred SARPONG

The third Economic Community of West Africa State (ECOWAS) Ministerial meeting on biotechnology is scheduled for Accra, Ghana from March 27-30, 2007.

The meeting of ECOWAS ministers will discuss and adopt the sub-region's action plan on biotechnology developed by the ECOWAS Secretariat subsequent to the second ministerial meeting on

biotechnology that was held in Bamako, Mali, in June 2005.

In attendance will be agricultural ministers within the sub-region and various experts in the biotechnology sector. They will assist the media in understanding the issues of biotechnology and bio-safety to be discussed at the ministerial meeting and thereby enhance the quality of reporting. A pre-conference on the subject will be

organised for selected media personnel.

With the support of United States aid (USAID), the training is being organised by ISAAA in collaboration with the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) and the Journalists Association of West Africa (RECOAB).

Ghana has developed a comprehensive bio-safety bill, which is expected to regulate

biotechnology and bio-safety matters and other related issues.

However, the bill is currently before Cabinet and waiting for approval. Stakeholders in the food-safety industry are worried over Cabinet's delay in giving approval to the bill. It is believed that Cabinet approval and the passage of the bill into law would solve controversial issues with regard to genetically modified foods in the country.

The bill is to also ensure an adequate level of production in the field, and handling and use of living, modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology.



Shirley Ayorko Bushegyi,
Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister

The Ghanaian Observer
Friday March 30, 2007

Meeting the challenges of Biotechnology and Biosafety ECOWAS Ministers Adopt Action Plan Today

EDMUND SMITH-ASANTE

Agriculture, Environment and Science Ministers from 15 West African States will today examine and adopt an action plan to meet the challenges of Biotechnology and Biosafety in the sub region.

The action plan was arrived at, after Biotechnology and Biosafety experts and scientists in the West African sub region had laboriously gone to work to discuss the modalities for three days preceding the 3rd ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology which comes off today March 30, 2007 in Accra.

In the run up to the three-day experts meeting, the second ECOWAS Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology was held in Bamako (Mali) from 21 to 24 June 2005 to adopt measures necessary for the development of Biotechnologies, a regional approach to biosafety and a biotechnology information and communication strategy and policy.

The meeting made recommendations in each of the three areas mentioned and agreed to institutionalise an annual ministerial conference on biotechnologies.

It also requested the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat, at that point in time, to finalise and disseminate, in collaboration with the West and Central African Council for

Agricultural Research and Development (CORAF/WECARD) and the Permanent Inter-State Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS), an action plan for the implementation of its recommendations.

Thus, the main objective of today's ministerial meeting is to examine and adopt the 2006-2010 Action Plan for the development of biotechnology and biosafety within ECOWAS, prepared in line with the decision taken by the ministers at their second meeting held in Bamako in June 2005.

The ECOWAS Ministers would be looking forward to a clearly defined and adopted action plan containing objectives, expected results, activities, expected impact of biotechnology, beneficiaries of same, cost of employing biotech, the role and responsibilities of stakeholders, a time-frame and its implementation.

Those who worked on the soon-to-be-adopted plan of action included two experts from each ECOWAS Member State with one specialising in biotechnology and the other in biosafety; experts from International Governmental Organisations (IGOs), and regional research systems: CILSS, CORAF, Union économique et monétaire ouest-africaine (UEMOA), International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), research Center for rice development in sub-Saharan Africa



Pineapple grown with tissue culture technology at the Biotechnology & Nuclear Agriculture Research Institute (BINARI), Accra

(WARDA), International Plant Genetic Resources (IPGRI) and the International Food Policy Institute (IFPRI).

It also included representatives of organisation of producers, the private sector, civil society, partners and donors such as FAO, USAID, DfID, IRDC, CTA, the World Bank, UNIDO, FARA, UNICN, two resource persons and officers from the ECOWAS Executive Secretariat.

Legal framework for Biotech to be ready this year

EDMUND SMITH-ASANTE

The Chief Director of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Environment, Mr. Nyankamawa, has stated that Ghana is working hard to ensure the necessary legal framework to facilitate research and the general use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is in place by the end of 2007.

Mr. Nyankamawa noted that a legal framework is necessary for the maintenance of integrity of the country's green environment.

Although the Chief Director confirmed that the research into modern agricultural biotechnology is already on-going in various research institutions and universities in the country, he explained that the use of more advanced technologies in genetic engineering is hampered by the lack of an enabling legislative framework.

Representing the Deputy Minister for Local Government, Rural Development and Environment Hon. Abraham Dwuma Ofoom at the opening of the 3rd ECOWAS Ministerial Meeting on Biotechnology in Accra last Tuesday, he said because research in biotechnology as well as the accessing of the trans-boundary environmental safety of a GMO for introduction into the country are expensive, regional initiatives are crucial to share expertise and costs in the development and safe application of biotechnologies.

The four-day Ministerial Meeting, which began Tuesday with a two-day experts meeting, attracted ministers of agriculture, environment and science as well as biotechnology and biosafety experts from countries in the West Africa sub region with the theme "Adoption of The 2006-2010 Action Plan For Meeting The Challenges of Biotechnology and Biosafety."

Noting that the subject of Biotechnology and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in particular, has raised widespread public concern about the possible impact on human health and the environment, the Local Government, Rural Development and Environment Chief Director, Mr. Nyankamawa, said the sensitivity of the issues highlight the need for responsible policies within the West Africa region.

He stated though, that such policies must be aligned to international levels to ensure that the concerns are addressed, whilst at the same time the protection of the environment and human health remain a priority.



Hon. Abraham Dwuma Ofoom

sciences could be used as important tools to feed West Africa and indeed the world's growing populations. "New biotechnology techniques have the potential to deliver improved food quality and environmental benefits through agronomically enhanced crops," he said, adding "Enhanced food and feed quality may be linked to disease prevention and may result in the reduced use of chemical pesticide, fertilisers and drugs leading to more sustainable agricultural practices and poverty alleviation."

Mr. Nyankamawa also stated that biotechnology can also result in major health care benefits, and allow for the production of cheaper and

safer drugs in large quantities.

He said that in Ghana, tissue culture, which is an aspect of biotechnology, is currently in use in the pineapple industry for the production of thousands of the MD2 pineapple suckers to meet up-market export demand characteristics for such products.

The Minister for Education, Science and Sports, Hon. Papa Owusu Ankomah formally opened an exhibition on Biotechnology with some rhetorical questions.

He asked how biotechnology research could be popularized in the West Africa sub region, support could be lent to biotechnology research by way of funding and what biotechnology areas the sub region has comparative advantage of across the globe.

Currently the biotechnology framework Ghana is working with has been developed for the country under the United Nations Environment Programme-Global Environment Facility (UNEP-GEF) framework.

Training on the implementation of a regulatory framework in anticipation of the yet-to-be-passed Ghana Biosafety Law, has been entrusted into the hands of Ghana's regulatory officials and scientists by a USAID-Sponsored programme on Biosafety systems.

Over 200 million people are malnourished in sub-Saharan Africa

By Patricia Ofori Atta
Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has been identified as the region with the highest prevalence rate of under nourishment in Africa, with women and children worst affected.

According to the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) and the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) West Africa, the number of the undernourished has increased from 69 million in 1996 to 206 million in 2006. Thus one in three in SSA is malnourished.

Additionally, food and nutrition remain Africa's most fundamental challenges for human welfare and economic growth. While living conditions are improving almost everywhere else, widespread and object poverty and hunger are getting worse in Africa.

ISAAA and PBS observes that, while caused by poverty, malnutrition also perpetuates a

Africa

generational cycle of poverty, as a malnourished girl tends to grow up and bear underweight, malnourished children and malnourished children are likely to be intellectually impaired, with diminished productive and creative capacities.

The report says, malnutrition is a culprit in 55 per cent of these deaths. Iron deficiency anaemia is a contributing factor in over 20 per cent of post-birth maternal deaths in Africa.

About 43 million people worldwide are suffering from varying degrees of brain damage due to iodine deficiency.

Some 26 million children are stunted (shorter than they should be for their age), nearly 67 million are

estimated to be wasted (weigh less than they should for their height), and about 183 million weigh less than they should for their age.

UNICEF also reports that malnourished children are much more likely to die as a result of common childhood disease than those who are adequately nourished. The most critically vulnerable groups are developing foetuses, children up to the age of three and women before and during pregnancy and while they are breastfeeding.

According to UNICEF, Some 2.2 million children die from diarrhoeal dehydration as a result of persistent diarrhoea, which is often aggravated by malnutrition. Anaemia, which has been identified as the cause of at least 20 to 23 per cent of the post-partum maternal deaths in Asia and

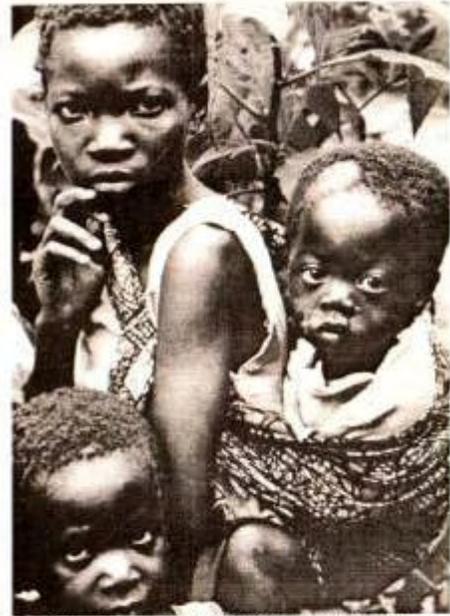
Africa, also ensues from malnourishment.

The report further revealed that nearly half of the population of sub-Saharan Africa lives below the international poverty line, a higher percentage than in any other region.

Furthermore the report said that under nourishment is a central manifestation of poverty and as poverty worsens, food becomes more important than ever.

"It deepens other aspects of poverty by reducing the capacity for work and resistance to disease, and by affecting children's mental development and educational achievements." The report said.

According to the report, the cause of this malnutrition, therefore, is poverty at the household, com-



The faces of malnutrition. According to UNICEF, some 2.2 million children die from diarrhoeal dehydration

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Over 200 million people...

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munity and national levels which results in lack of access to such basic necessities as food, health care, safe drinking water and sanitation.

The report said a second cause is an insidious combination of simple ignorance and prejudice against women, which deprives them of the rest and care they require during pregnancy and lactation, as well as access to education and economic resources.

In addition, malnutrition may pose heavy future economic burdens to societies.

ISAAA and PBS reports suggest that full-term low-birth weight babies are likely as adults to develop chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and hypertension.

The two institutions also note that the roots of malnutrition have long been well known, so are its solutions. Pregnant and lactating women need to work less, rest and eat well.

They said in their reports that babies need to be breastfed exclusively until the age of six months, and with appropriate

supplements until the age of two. Families need to have access to adequate preventive and curative health care.

Furthermore the reports called on governments to ensure that their people get access to safe water and sanitation to prevent infection and disease. Supplements of nutrients such as vitamin A and iron can easily be made available, at minimal cost.

The ISAAA and PBS report said that the simple act of iodizing salt can save millions from brain damage. And new techniques have been developed for easy detection of vitamin and mineral deficiencies.

Cost-effective, easy to implement programmes, with educational and practical follow-up components, can be put in place at the grassroots level, allowing communities to take the matter of nutrition into their own hands, monitor their children's growth and organize to secure what they require to meet their children's needs.

According to the ISAAA and PBS report, Food insecurity and hunger are closely related to poverty and an inability to purchase food. Tackling hunger cannot be solved by simply producing more food, hence the need more productivity.

Minister says biotechnology can be used to reduce poverty

Patricia Ofori Atta.

The Minister of Education, Science and Sports, Honorable Papa Owusu-Ankomah has said that the development of biotechnology in West Africa can be used to reduce poverty.

He stated that it is for researchers to prove to society the need to use bio-

technology as a developmental tool.

Papa Owusu Ankomah said this during the opening of an exhibition on biotechnology in Accra. According to him the only way to reduce poverty in the sub-region is to exploit the benefits of biotechnology.

"Biotechnology is the tool for exploiting new way of producing the basic

needs of our health and the preservation of our environment" he sated.

He stated that the time has come for Africa to know the areas of biotechnology in order to have comparative advantage across the globe.

On his part, the Deputy Minister of Local Government, Rural Development and Environment,

Honorable Abraham Dwuma Odoom stressed that life science and biotechnology are very important tools in the fight against poverty in the sub-region.

He stated that, the new biotechnology techniques have the potential to improved food quality band environmental benefits.

"The enhancement of food and feed quality in the sub-

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Minister says...

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region may be linked to disease prevention, and may result in the reduced use of chemical pesticides fertilizers and drugs, leading to more sustainable agricultural practices and poverty alleviation" he said.

According to Mr. Dwuma Odoom, the subject of biotechnology and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in particular has raised public concern about the possible impact on human health and environment.

He said the sensitivity of these issues highlight the need for responsible policies within the

sub-regions to ensure that these concerns are addressed.

Mr. Dwuma stated that, research in modern agricultural biotechnology is already on-going in various research institutions and the universities in Ghana.

"We shared in the resolve of colleagues in the sub-region to show the way for ward and to build the needed capacity for the safe exploitation of biotechnology in various sectors of our green environment especially in agricultural and health centre" he said.

He said, Ghana is working hard to ensure the necessary legal framework to facilitate research and the general use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) I is in place by the end of the year.

USAID director sees nothing wrong with biotechnology

By Patricia Ofori Atta

The West Africa Mission Director of USAID, Dr J. Cheema has said that biotechnology is one of the tools that can help African countries to achieve sustainable agricultural growth.

According to Dr Cheema, African agriculture needs to grow faster not only to feed a growing African population, but also to raise incomes and boost trade if the continent is to improve its position in the world economy.

"However, it is not stand-alone solution and must be pursued in conjunction with other improvements in agricultural management such as seed delivery systems and appropriate regulations in order to encourage the private sector investment" she said.

She said this at the third

ECOWAS Ministerial conference on biotechnology and biosafety in Accra, which adopted a five-year action plan on biotechnology and biosafety.

Dr Cheema said that effort and regional cooperation are required to maximise productivity and to ensure that biotechnologies are developed and used safely.

She said some experts have estimated that Africa's agriculture needs to grow at around 6 percent to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

"As a new technology, a lot of questions have been raised about the safety of products of biotechnology but Africa believes it is important for their nations to develop regional regulations" she stated.

According to her, Africa's

successes lies in soybeans, cotton and maize, while some of the technologies used in United States may have significant economic potential for the continent.

Dr Cheema said, there are other technologies, which have potential for West Africa such as genetically improved cassava with resistance to cassava mosaic diseases, and technologies to accelerate development of new varieties of crops and diagnostics for livestock diseases.

Speaking at the programme, the Agriculture Officer of Plant Production and Protection Department in Rome, Dr Kakoli Ghosh said biotechnology has increasingly presented many countries with a new policy in the economic development.

According to Dr Kakoli, a strong action oriented biotechnology policy and approach is needed to complement conventional technologies like plant breeding and diseases management systems to allow it to become apart of an integrated and comprehensive agriculture programme.

She stated that, her organisation is not aware of any scientific data on potential negative effects of GMOs on human health or the environment. However, the reluctance of GM companies to label their products sold in supermarkets has given consumers cause to worry that the industry has something to hide.



Consumption of aflatoxin-infested food causes cancer and Kwashiorkor

By Patricia Ofori Atta

The African Agricultural Technology Foundations (AATF) and Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) have raised an alarm that the consumption of aflatoxin-infested food can cause cancer, chronic gastritis, kwashiorkor and even death.

Aflatoxin is a poison that can be found on some fungal-contaminated cereals and nuts. It is particularly a problem for stored grain and peanuts.

The consumption of Aflatoxin-contaminated commodities damages human health, animal health and food supply. It is related to several acute and chronic diseases in humans as well as in animals.

According to AATF and FARA, Aflatoxins are detected occasionally in milk, cheese, corn, peanuts, cottonseed, nuts, almonds, figs, spices, and a variety of foods and feeds. Milk, eggs, and meat products are sometimes contaminated because of the animal consumption of aflatoxin-contaminated feed. However, the commodities with the highest risk of aflatoxin contamination are corn, peanuts, and cottonseed.

These were revealed at the West Africa media workshop organized by ISAAA in collaboration with FARA and Journalist Association of West Africa (RECOAB) in Accra.

AATF and FARA observed that, food grains are highly susceptible to contamination by different moulds which under the right conditions can produce aflatoxin that are dangerous for humans and livestock. Food grains contaminated with aflatoxin produce fungi, which are unsafe for human and livestock consumption.

The World Health Organization (WHO) report in 2003 showed that over 20,000 lives were lost to food poisoning in Africa through Aflatoxin.

The Food Agriculture Orga-

nization (FAO) said the International trade in agricultural commodities such as wheat, rice, barley, corn, sorghum, soybeans, groundnuts and oilseeds amounts to hundreds of millions of tones each year.

But many of these commodities run a high risk of aflatoxin contamination. This calls for regulating the storage and sale of food. Regulations on aflatoxins have been set and are strictly enforced by most importing countries, making international trade.

AATF and FARA observe that, the transport chain for agricultural commodities from village to port, from the port of the exporting country to that of the importing country as well as from the port to the distribution centre can be long, thus causing the contamination.

Many studies provide evidence that chemical treatment via ammonization may provide an effective method to detoxify aflatoxin-contaminated corn and other commodities.

AATF and FARA noted that, Aflatoxins often occur in crops in the field prior to harvest. "Post harvest contamination can occur if crop drying is delayed and during storage of the crop if water is allowed to exceed critical values for the mold growth" they said.

According to them, Corn is probably the commodity of greatest worldwide concern, because it is grown in climates that are likely to have perennial contamination with aflatoxins and corn is the staple food of many countries.

AATF says, the problem of Aflatoxins in Africa food supply cannot be addressed through regulatory controls alone. The technologies that reduce insect infestation and fungal contamination of crops are still in the field and need to be applied.



Promotion de la biotechnologie en Afrique de l'Ouest Plus de 26 millions de dollars à mobiliser

C'est fait : désormais la biotechnologie moderne aura droit de cité dans l'espace CEDEAO (Communauté économique des Etats de l'Afrique de l'Ouest). En effet, la conférence ministérielle de la communauté a adopté à Accra, le 30 mars 2007 aux environs de 18h00, un plan d'actions d'un coût de 26 215 000 de dollars US pour la mise en œuvre de la biotechnologie et de la biosécurité dans les pays membres.



Le vice-président de la commission de la CEDEAO, Jean De Dieu Somba a représenté son président

■ Cyr Payim Ouedraogo

À la suite d'un florissant Faso qui expérimente depuis quelques années le coton IR, les 15 autres pays de la CEDEAO viennent, à travers le plan d'actions 2007-2011, adopté au Ghana, de donner le quart pour promouvoir la biotechnologie moderne dans leurs territoires respectifs. Troisième conférence de haut niveau après celle de Ouagadougou et de Bamako, la rencontre, présidée par le ministre de l'Agriculture et de l'élevage du pays hôte, Ernest Oubrick, s'est penchée sur les conclusions de la réunion des experts qui s'est déroulée du 27 au 29 mars. Le plan d'actions 2007-2011 (au lieu de 2006-2010) comprend trois composantes : à savoir le



Les ministres fondent un espoir sur la biotechnologie pour accroître les rendements au niveau de l'agriculture

développement de produits technologiques et la compétitivité agricole, gérer durablement les ressources génétiques, le développement d'une approche régionale de biosécurité, et la mise en place d'un mécanisme d'orientation, de coordination et de suivi du plan. Les ministres, à l'issue de leur conclavé, ont recommandé dans le texte en matière d'actes plus : l'établissement d'un protocole avec les cadres nationaux de biosécurité et le cadre régional de biosécurité ; l'unification de la communication sur la biosécurité ; l'intégration de l'initiative biosécurité de l'UEMOA dans le cadre de la mise en œuvre de plan d'actions dans l'espace CEDEAO ; la mise en œuvre d'un cadre régional de coordination et un cadre réglementaire et juridique de

biosécurité ; la mise en œuvre d'une stratégie de communication sur les risques dans le plan ; l'adaptation des cadres nationaux de biosécurité au cadre régional de biosécurité ; le renforcement des organes nationaux chargés des questions de biosécurité ; le renforcement des capacités des États membres de la CEDEAO à participer aux conférences internationales sur la biotechnologie et la biosécurité. Concernant le mécanisme de coordination de la mise en œuvre de plan d'actions, la conférence a aussi recommandé, sous le leadership de la commission de la CEDEAO, qu'une rencontre biennale regroupe les ministres de l'Agriculture, de l'Environnement, des Sciences et des Technologies. Il a été décidé que les comités nationaux interministériels sectoriels de la CEDEAO

(agriculture, environnement, sciences et techniques) de veiller aux progrès réalisés dans leurs domaines respectifs, pour répondre aux missions assignées à la réunion annuelle sur les biotechnologies, elles qu'instaurée par la conférence de Bamako en juin 2005.

Le show du Nigeria

Un comité technique a été créé pour se pencher sur la réalisation du plan d'actions de la CEDEAO de l'UEMOA, de l'UESS, de l'CEP-SA, de l'AFRICA, ainsi que des initiatives de CUBA/RECARA, d'agences techniques spécialisées dans les domaines de représentants des partenaires au développement, de représentants des pays qui assure la présidence de la CEDEAO, des organisations de producteurs,

(COPPA, etc.) et de système privé (mobilier, etc.).

Ce plan d'action peut être considéré comme étant celui des compromis, car juste après l'ouverture de la conférence, le Nigeria avait marqué sa volonté de disposer de plus de temps pour étudier le contenu du dit plan. La Gambie, qui dès le départ manifestait son adhésion au travail des experts, fit volte-face et appporta son appui à ce pays en liaison étroite avec ce serait inévitable de passer ce dernier au bord de la route, au regard de sa grandeur. Il s'agissait donc d'un débat au cours duquel, le Togo fit savoir sa surprise du moment que le pays de Olesegun Obasanjo a participé dans l'élaboration du document des experts. Dans les coulisses, les langues se délièrent et lassaient entendre qu'un pays anglophone comme le Nigeria avait des craintes de l'adoption de l'initiative de l'UEMOA en matière de solidarité, car n'étant pas membre de cette union. C'est pourquoi en guise de compromis, il a été décidé d'inscrire cette initiative dans le cadre de la mise en œuvre du plan d'action dans l'espace CEDEAO.

Un acte qui aurait permis à la conférence de ne pas perdre deux ou trois jours de plus à l'élaboration.

La prochaine rencontre des ministres se déroulera en 2009 en Côte d'Ivoire.



Le ministre de l'Alimentation et de l'agriculture du pays hôte, Ernest Debrah a présidé cette 3e rencontre des ministres



Photo de famille des officiels, juste après l'ouverture de la conférence

Les coulisses

■ La grande fierté d'une indépendance

Accra tout entier est drapé des couleurs du pays : maisons, taxis, véhicules de particuliers, taxis, panneaux publicitaires, etc. A voir tous ces drapeaux blancs, on éprouve vraiment du bonheur d'être Ghanaien.

Ce genre d'initiatives est à saluer énormément et qu'il inspire également les Burkinaabés lors du jubilé d'or de leur indépendance en 2010.

■ Le Nigeria et son satellite

Au cours de la conférence, la délégation nigérienne n'a pas hésité, dès ses premières interventions, à annoncer que le président Olesegun Obasanjo assistera dans quelques mois en Chine de la mise en orbite du premier satellite de son pays. Fortement ironiques, les Nigériens ont déjà invité les autres pays africains à profiter de cette belle opportunité.

■ Lâchés par un confrère ghanéen

Des collègues de Tchad et du Bénin ont été émus par le comportement d'un journaliste du pays hôte. Alors qu'ils étaient au marché à la recherche d'objets de souvenirs, ils seront surpris par les confidences de notre confrère ghanéen à un commerçant. En effet, il ne s'est pas gêné de dire à son compatriote de doubler, voire tripler le prix de ses marchandises, car de il, les francophones sont riches. Pris de laideur, Tchadiens et Béninois ont dû se débrouiller sans lui.

■ Les voleurs veillaient au grain

Claudia Canales, une participante de la conférence des

ministres vint des Philippines, a été agrippée par des voleurs qui opèrent avec un moulin. Presque qu'elle quittait le siège de l'Union (une des structures organisationnelles de la conférence) tenue dans une zone huppée de la ville, les agresseurs, voulant s'emparer de son ordinateur portable, l'ont tenté sur quelques mètres, causant plusieurs blessures à la pauvre dame.

Alors son ordinateur, sa carte de crédit, son passeport ont dû être récupérés par les brigades. Un minuscule souvenir pour cette femme qui était la première à venir au Ghana.

■ Accra-Ouaga : deux jours de val

De plus en plus, il devient difficile de voyager en un temps record dans la sous-région. Pour ceux qui font des affaires, c'est vraiment un parcours de combattant. Même si nous ne sommes pas des opérateurs économiques pour vivre régulièrement ce calvaire, nous avons, lors du retour au bercail, dormi à Abidjan le 30 mars dans la nuit, pour reprendre d'autres vols le lendemain.

De pays de Ghana, nous avons été amenés le 31 mars à Coudé (Cairé), puis à Bamako par un autre avion. De cette dernière ville, c'est un troisième avion qui nous a emmenés pour Ouagadougou où nous sommes finalement arrivés à 19h30.

Après réflexion, le choix de passer par la route pour relier Accra à Ouaga aurait été moins long, plus économique que l'avion.

Rassemblements par C.P.O.

CROP BIOTECH UPDATE (MARCH 30, 2007)

AFRICA

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ECOWAS CONFERENCE ON BIOTECHNOLOGY IN GHANA

Some 200 multi-sectoral representatives from the agriculture and environment sector are meeting in Accra, Ghana to deliberate on issues pertaining to biotechnology in the sub-region. This third Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Ministerial Conference on Biotechnology's theme is "Adoption of 2006-2010 Action Plan for Meeting the Challenges of Biotechnology and Biosafety".

Ghana News Agency reports that the 2006-2010 Action Plan focuses on measures recommended by the Ministers to develop a regional approach to biosafety and a strategy for biotechnology information, communication and policy in sub-Saharan Africa.

See the full article at:

<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=121477>

CROP BIOTECH UPDATE (APRIL 4, 2007)

AFRICA

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ECOWAS MINISTERS AGREE ON BIOTECH PLAN

An agreement was forged by the Ministers from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to use biotechnology to increase food production in their region. This was reached at the third ECOWAS ministerial meeting on biotechnology and biosafety held in Accra, Ghana. A communiqué issued at the end of the meeting noted that the technology will improve productivity, make the farming sector more competitive and ensure sustainable management of natural resources. However, safety measures at both the national and regional levels were deemed important as part of the implementation process.

A regional and comprehensive plan is envisioned to benefit from biotechnology developments. This will necessitate the assistance of development partners and the collaborative efforts of governments of various countries, said Marcel Nwalozie, from the west and central African Council for Agriculture Research and Development, an umbrella organization that co-ordinates agricultural research for west and central Africa.

Read the full report at

<http://www.voanews.com/english/2007-03-31-voa16.cfm>.

8.2. List of participants

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