GMASSURE Launch and Awareness Raising Symposium: 2-3 July 2014

Event report

Summary

The ACP-EU action "GMASSURE" was launched on the 2nd and 3rd of July 2014 at the Orion Velmore Hotel in Centurion, South Africa. Project partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries from various backgrounds attended the event. The majority of Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries were represented by one or more delegates; totalling representation from 11 member states.

The first day kicked off with an introduction to the Action and the expected results. The specific objective of the Action (as put forward in the proposal) was "To facilitate informed decision making on the use of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) in agriculture and food by enhanced knowledge of stakeholders." In addition, the symposium saw presentations from a wide range of stakeholders involved in biosafety training and regulation, the importance of Genetically Modified (GM) crops and its commercialisation in Southern Africa, as well as aspects of communication around these crops.

The following day the deliberations were kicked off with a SADC representative discussing regional cooperation and what would be expected from member states to advance the debate on biotechnology. SADC country representatives then had the opportunity to update the attendees on the status of biotechnology and biosafety in each of their respective countries. The event was closed following a facilitated open discussion.

A few central themes from the deliberations emerged which delegates thought vital for the successful implementation of the Action:

- ✓ A lot can be learnt from the different approaches per country
- ✓ Experiences can be shared between countries in the region
- ✓ There are complimentary and overlapping initiatives which should be closely consulted
- ✓ There are a range of stakeholders in the GM landscape and their perspectives should be taken into account
- ✓ Multiple stakeholder groups should be involved in the Action activities
- ✓ Communication (and a communication strategy) will be vital for the Action and similar efforts going forward.

Delegates undertook to partake and contribute to the Action activities towards achieving the following results for the region:

- ✓ Increased capacity of stakeholders
- ✓ Increased understanding of biotechnology and biosafety issues

- ✓ Increased networking on GMO issues
- ✓ Improved/informed decision-making by regulators.

Feedback and deliberations are discussed in more detail in the sections below.

Delegate introductions

All delegates introduced themselves, their affiliation and potential contribution to the Action. (A full list of participating delegates has been distributed and is available on request from the project secretariat).

Biosafety perspectives: UNEP, DST and Biosafety SA Platform

Presentations in this session were concluded before the discussion ensued. The session included the following presentations (all presentations have been circulated and are available from the secretariat on request):

- Importance of biosafety regulation and risk analysis- Dr Martha Kandawa-Schulz on behalf of Dr Alex Owusu-Biney (United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP)
- A regulator's perspective of GM biosafety: who, what and why- Mr Ben Durham (Department of Science and Technology, South Africa)
- Crop biosafety in South Africa; problems, solutions, level of awareness and the role of Biosafety SA- Dr Hennie Groenewald (Biosafety SA Platform).

Discussion: The issue of uniformity in Biosafety regulations between the countries was raised. Why were there different Biosafety regulations? Discussions indicated that regulations needed to be appropriate per country; and that a similar, but not identical approach, should be encouraged. More reasons for different regulations included the fact that biosafety acts in the countries were very different; as well as the fact that phytosanitary requirements in the different states dictated biosafety regulations.

Further feedback was received electronically and indicated that harmonization could only be at the level of technical procedures.

There were strong recommendations on key biosafety issues:

- ✓ Countries should be transparent in their approach to biosafety and biotechnology
- ✓ Benefits of the technology should ideally accrue to more than one section of society (not only farmers)
- ✓ Risk assessments should also focus on the benefits of biotechnology and not only the risks and hazards
- ✓ All stakeholder groups and their perspectives should be taken into account.

The importance of risk assessment frameworks was highlighted, and the fact that Biosafety SA has put these into place. An important consideration here is the context within which risk assessments are carried out. It was also highlighted that biotechnology communication was a big focus within the platform activities.

Further discussions in the section centred on biosafety/biotechnology communication. It was queried whether people have already drawn their own conclusions on the technology; largely because of biased reporting through various channels. It was reported that a survey in 2004

indicated that most people were undecided; and suggested that this particular group be targeted. There was also support for a stronger role from scientists in communicating; and indications from literature were that the public generally trusted the information they received from scientists.

A further suggestion was to learn from other fields: in the early phases of cellular phone technology there were many negative reports about the health impacts; but these have been overcome. Is there learning from this field for communication strategies on biosafety/biotechnology? Other suggestions included: to target those with influence; have information in open access, easily reachable repositories; not to generalize on biotechnology issues which may lead to confusion; and speak about specific or appropriate reasons for adoption or rejection of technology.

GM crops in national biotechnology strategies

Presentation:

- Agricultural Biotechnology in the Bio-economy: the importance of GM crops in Southern Africa- Dr Maneshree Jugmoham-Naidu (Department of Science and Technology, South Africa)

The department's role in the biotechnology field in the region was outlined. The main goals of the department are to coordinate stakeholders and role-players; develop strategic innovation competencies; and develop strategic innovation programmes to address the gaps in the value chain.

Discussion: there were queries about implementation of new programmes and challenges the department faced. These include a sufficient level of funding; funding relevant projects; and setting up new programmes. Also, there were indications that the current system supported only academics and not the full value chain; that research was taking place in silos and sometimes duplicated; and that the National System of Innovation will in future preferably focus on a systems approach; not projects. The importance of a bioportal or interface housing researcher, industry and other stakeholder information in a database was highlighted. This should include information on where people could, or already are, collaborating.

A further query centred on liability and redress of material leaving the country. It was mentioned that SA have testing facilities mandated to test all material; customs officials were trained in what to look out for; and the fact that products exported from SA are confirmed as low risk.

Decision-making capacity for GMO commercialisation

Presentation:

- Building decision making capacity for commercialisation of Genetically Modified Crops in Africa – Mr Wally Green (Independent Biotechnology Professional)

An independent biotechnology stakeholder presented the importance of environmental risk assessment for GM crop commercialisation. Again it was emphasised that the positive benefits should also be taken into consideration. Here, the positive impacts on agricultural production should be kept in mind. The delegates were left with the message that the current levels of assessment of GM crops were very high; and that a gene banking system for each country or region to protect germplasm was vital.

Discussion: it was noted that the risk assessment message has been spread for numerous years and may need repackaging in order to convince stakeholders of the technology benefits; not only risks. Two aspects were highlighted as important considerations: acceptance of the technology should be

taken down to farmer level; and the fact that new traits will become available in future with direct benefits to consumers (not only farmers).

The issue of GM seed cost was also briefly touched on. It was mentioned that when all costs were considered, planting of GM seeds (with resultant yield/returns) still resulted in cost savings to a farmer.

GM crop risk communication

Presentation:

- Experiences in sub-Saharan Africa with GM crop risk communication – Dr Dennis Ndolo Obonyo (International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, South Africa)

Successful risk communications strategies, as well as some remaining communication challenges in sub-Saharan Africa, were highlighted by ICGEB. The importance of workshops and conferences with specific focus areas in communication, as well as leveraging regional resources and increasing cooperation, were suggested as a way forward. It was further suggested that the approach be taken of training stakeholders per country and getting them to disseminate information at the home base.

Discussions centred on claims that GM foods were less nutritious. It was stated that there is no evidence for such a claim; and that regulators monitor nutritional content of GM crops in their assessments. The genotype and environmental interactions play a role in determining nutritional content of any crop.

It was also suggested that technical terminology associated with biotechnology should be avoided when engaging the general public.

Regional cooperation

Presentation:

- SADC regional cooperation and the expectations required from member states – Ms Anneline Morgan (SADC Secretariat, Botswana)

The importance of several SADC initiatives and agendas (including Agenda 2063 and STISA 2024); as well as foreign and own funding into science and technology in the SADC member states were presented. Several suggestions were put forward; those important for the Action include: contributing to human capital development in Africa; exchange of knowledge and experiences; promotion and support of research networks on the continent; and strengthening regional and continental cooperation.

Discussion: Delegates inquired about the marketing of facilities and access to infrastructure. It was noted that a regional portal is planned; which is envisaged to include scientific and innovation programmes at the member state level. Also, delegates were interested in how inputs from meetings could be taken forward to ministerial and SADC level. The secretariat responded that delegates present should take the message forward and table in their home countries since SADC takes its messages from the member states. There could also be a lot of learning from other African regions.

Country status/experiences wrt biotechnology and biosafety

Feedback was given by a representative from each member state represented. Presenters in the section are tabled below-

Country represented	Status update presented by
Botswana	Mr Charles Mazereku
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Prof Mundala Tete
Lesotho	Mr Maboi Mahula
Malawi	Dr Weston Mwase
Mozambique	Ms Yara Gaspar
Namibia	Ms Mwangala Nalisa
South Africa	Dr Hennie Groenewald
Swaziland	Ms Cebesile Magagula
Tanzania	Dr Nicholas Nyange
Zambia	Dr Paul Zambezi
Zimbabwe	Dr Jonathan Mufandaedza

Significant strides have been made by some member states and it is worthwhile to note the efforts of two members in particular:

- ✓ Malawi; where confined field trials (CFTs) of Bt cotton have taken place over multiple seasons, numerous training events associated with the CFTs have been presented to different stakeholder groups, and a journalist forum has been established.
- ✓ Tanzania; where CFTs have also taken place, and research programmes on both cassava and maize GM are ongoing. They have also released in excess of 200 media articles dealing with biotechnology.

These two examples may be used as case studies in future training.

A number of states have also undertaken awareness surveys and know the level of biotechnology/biosafety awareness among different stakeholder groups. However, some major challenges were also experienced; some of which were shared between the member states:

- ✓ Lack of human capital, funding and infrastructure
- ✓ Lack of networks in the field
- ✓ Coupled with the above, an erosion of experts to neighbouring countries
- ✓ Long lead times for parliamentary approval of bills
- ✓ Lack of testing laboratories
- ✓ Lack of materials in local languages
- ✓ Lack of appropriate extension or reading materials
- ✓ Lack of information dissemination (low awareness levels)
- ✓ Political affiliations or own convictions of those involved in media
- ✓ Lack of NGOs to further the benefits of the technology
- ✓ There was a need to develop and subsequently adopt more efficient agricultural production systems.

Open discussion

Further suggestions from delegates were highlighted in the open discussion and included-

- ✓ Provision of training by the Action to the right stakeholder groups to influence decision-making
- ✓ Communication platforms and a communication strategy is needed
- ✓ A question and answers/FAQ section on the Action portal will be valuable
- ✓ A one-page report from the launch/symposium should be drafted and utilised to get buy-in from politicians
- ✓ It is vital that countries identify the right people to participate in training events
- ✓ SADC agricultural sector representatives should be more closely involved in the Action.

Conclusion

With the majority of member states present indicating their support for the Action, the event was viewed as a major success. The Action activities will kick off shortly and delegates will benefit further from these. However, the project secretariat reiterated that the delegates need to identify the right additional stakeholders (from designated groups) from their countries to participate in subsequent training and dissemination events.

The project was envisaged to enhance knowledge of stakeholders. Throughout the launch, it became apparent that there is a lot of experience and learning to be had from the different SADC member states and that a lasting network will go a long way to achieve long-term results (as outlined previously) in the field. Coupled with this is the need to be aware of what the stakeholders in the different countries have done/are doing. Hence, local and regional awareness and cooperation will be critical.

Another aspect which enjoyed considerable attention during the deliberations was that of communication. All sessions, regardless of focus, had some discussion on the issue. The Action has many activities and initiatives planned for this aspect and it will be a vital component of the Action's successful implementation.

The next event at which stakeholders will convene is the Biosafety training workshop in Namibia.