

Tanzania Forum To Facilitate Local Debate On Agricultural Biotechnology



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One more step towards bringing the debate on agricultural biotechnology closer to the people who stand to gain or lose most from biotechnology was taken recently with the launch of the Open Forum for Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB) Tanzania Chapter.

Tanzania, like many African countries, faces a decreasing level of agricultural productivity caused by frequent droughts, poor crop varieties and livestock breeds, diseases and a low technological base. At the heart of agricultural biotechnology is the mission to change the situation of the almost 800 million people who go to bed daily on an empty stomach, most of whom come from developing countries in Africa.

The most aggressive debates on agricultural technology have however been in rich countries, with protagonists hardly able to conceptualize the plight of the nearly 40,000 people who die every day due to hunger-related causes.

The World Bank estimates that by 2020, the number of undernourished could surpass one billion. Speaking during the launch of OFAB Tanzania, the Director General of Tanzania's Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) Dr Hassan Mshinda said that a lack of proper information on the opportunities offered by biotechnology has resulted in a slow adoption of various agro-technologies that can help the country feed its citizens.

He said that developing countries have generally been eclipsed in the dialogue on food biotechnology crops, yet they comprise more than 80 percent of the global population, and its people form the majority of those who suffer from hunger-related deaths and diseases.

OFAB will hold monthly luncheon meetings, in which stakeholders will share knowledge and experiences; and explore new avenues of bringing the benefits of biotechnology to the agricultural sector in Tanzania.

"There are specific conditions and different levels of awareness in different countries, therefore the need for localizing debate on crop biotechnology", said Dr. Mshinda during the launch held in May. The Chief Guest during the launch was the Minister of Agriculture Food Security and Cooperatives Stephen Wasira.

The Minister said that public understanding of biotechnology has great implication in successful application of biotechnology in research for development and on the acceptance of products developed from that research

"Stakeholders including policymakers and decision-makers, research managers and scientists in many developing countries including Tanzania, have low awareness about biotechnology, its impacts, as well as its potential for socio economic development", said the Minister.

OFAB is supported by the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) which also supports the Forum Chapters in Kenya , Uganda and Nigeria .

The Forum aims to facilitate relevant discussion on agricultural technology as it relates to the needs of poor countries.

According to Dr. Daniel Mataruka Executive Director of AATF, there is growing development in biotechnology worldwide, with the number of farmers increasing to 13 million farmers planting 125 million hectares of biotech crops.

"About 90 percent of these are poor small-holder farmers, an indicator that agricultural biotechnology are an indicator that this is the technology of the future", says Dr. Mataruka.

AATF is a not-for-profit foundation that promotes public/private partnerships to deliver agricultural technologies to poor smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

One of the major gripes by opponents of biotechnology, especially genetic engineering, is that wealthy companies stand to benefit most where the technologies are adopted.

Tanzania is one of the countries where AATF is coordinating the Water Efficient Maize for Africa (WEMA) project.

WEMA seeks to develop drought-tolerant maize for Africa using conventional breeding, marker-assisted breeding, and biotechnology.

The long-term goal is to make drought-tolerant maize varieties available royalty-free for the drought-tolerant trait to small-scale farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa.

WEMA is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and led in Tanzania by COSTECH. Other countries in the project are Kenya , Uganda , Mozambique and South Africa .

The Nairobi-based non-profit organization African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) is coordinating the project. Other institutions involved include the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and Monsanto.

In this project, AATF, CIMMYT, and Monsanto have signed a legal agreement so that any drought-tolerant maize variety developed through this project will be licensed to AATF, which will identify local seed multipliers to make the seed available to smallholder African farmers at the regular price of maize seed without royalty for the drought tolerant-trait.

Farmers will also have the right to keep their harvested grain for replanting if they so wish. The new maize varieties will be developed using a combination of conventional plant breeding and modern biotechnology or genetic modification. In the WEMA project, Monsanto will help accelerate the breeding process through what is known as marker-assisted breeding, which allows researchers to find and track genetic material associated with drought tolerance and focus on developing those lines.

CIMMYT, long recognized for expertise in conventional breeding and testing for drought tolerance, will provide high-yielding maize varieties that are adapted to African conditions.