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Biotechnology forum launched in Uganda

A monthly forum to facilitate the flow of information between the scientific community, policy makers and the general public has been launched in Kampala, Uganda. The Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology (OFAB), Uganda Chapter, was launched on December 14 at a Kampala hotel.

Speaking while formally inaugurating the Forum, Hon Eng Hillary Onek, the Minister of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries said that biotechnology is providing practical answers to some of the greatest challenges mankind faces at the dawn of a new millennium, such as hunger and malnutrition. He observed that biotechnology is an accessible and exciting new development that is already improving the way people live.

Hon Eng Onek called upon Uganda to embrace and apply modern science and technology in farming, saying that countries that have embraced modern agricultural technologies, have improved economic performance, reduced poverty and ensured greater food security for their people.

In Uganda, the enactment of the National Agricultural Research Act has paved way for all players both public and private to exploit their potential for Agricultural Research. The Ugandan Government has also put in place the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture (PMA) and the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), all in line with the government's programme of eradicating Poverty and improving livelihoods.

Speaking during the launch, Hon Dr Kibirige Sebunya, Minister of State, Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries underscored the need for a Ministry of Science and Technology saying that OFAB's host, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), cannot operate optimally under the Ministry of Finance and Planning.

The guest speaker, Mr Mark Cantley, Former Science Adviser for the European Commission, urged African nations to define their own needs and priorities rather than following an agenda dictated by other parties. Mr Cantley observed that a coordinated national strategy is desirable for advancing a country's interests in the use of modern biotechnology, a state hampered by a lack of political will.

Giving his remarks, Dr Mpoko Bokanga, the Executive Director, African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) challenged Africans to shun the unfounded fears of genetically modified foods. He said that decisions regarding the adoption of new technologies must be guided by informed choices based upon knowledge of local priorities, opportunities offered by such technologies, expected benefits and ability to manage risks.

In reference to OFAB, Dr Bokanga reiterated AATF's desire of providing a platform where a critical mass of knowledge can be accessed by policy and law makers, by journalists and the general public.

Dr Charles Mugoya, Program Manager, Agrobiodiversity and Biotechnology, Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in East and Central Africa (ASARECA) decried the lengthy policy formulation processes saying this was the greatest impediment to the use of biotechnology in Africa.

Dr Dennis Kyetere, the Director General National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO), moderated the Forum that brought together parliamentarians, scientists, journalists, the civil society, and policy makers.

OFAB is an initiative of the African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), in collaboration with the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) and the Program for Biosafety Systems (PBS) in partnership with the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) and the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA).

The initiative is a response to the need for better understanding of a range of products, benefits and concerns associated with biotechnology. The Forum provides an opportunity for exchange of information and encourages factual discussions on the issue of agricultural biotechnology.

A similar forum was inaugurated in Nairobi, Kenya in September 2006.

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For further information contact:
Arthur Makara
Senior Science Officer (Biosafety)
Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST)
Tel:256-414-705500
uncst@starcom.co.ug
OR
Nancy Muchiri
AATF Communication and Partnerships Manager
Tel: 254 20 4223700 or 735 992 206
E-mail: n.muchiri@aatf-africa.org

NOTES TO EDITORS:

About the African Agricultural Technology Foundation

The African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) is an African-led charity designed to facilitate and promote public/private partnerships for the identification, transfer, delivery and uptake of royalty-free proprietary technologies that will meet the needs of resource-poor smallholder farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa. The AATF facilitates networks that link food security, poverty reduction, market development and economic growth with the aim of delivering concrete value to African smallholder farmers and promoting the development of sustainable markets. To achieve this goal, the AATF works closely with African stakeholders – among others farmers, small businesses, research institutes, government extension services and NGOs in Sub-Saharan Africa – to identify the needs of resource-poor smallholder farmers and match them with technologies suitable for adaptation to African ecologies and farming systems. The AATF is incorporated in Kenya and in the UK. It is a registered charity in England and Wales. (www.aatf-africa.org)