

Policy coherence in biotechnology at the national and regional level: Summary report of the ABDC-10 parallel session¹

This session presented the experiences of the COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa), ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market) regions in developing regional and national biotechnology policies in agriculture. The first presenter, Dr. Walter Alhassan, discussed the regional activities that have been conducted by COMESA to harmonize biosafety policies related to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). COMESA has drafted guidelines and policies for handling commercial plantings of GMOs, trade in GM products, and emergency food aid with GM content. The regional work has also involved a biosafety road map to help national government establish biosafety frameworks, a communications strategy, an analysis of the economic impacts on trade if the region grows GMOs.

The second presenter, Dr. Banpot Napompeth, provided the participants with a discussion of the current status of biotechnology development and biosafety regulation in the ten ASEAN countries. He explained that the countries ranged from having functional biosafety systems with commercial GMOs to countries with only an outline of their biosafety system and no research into GMOs. He also reported no regional activities in this area.

The final presenter, Dr. Wendy Hollingsworth, discussed the process that CARICOM has used to draft a regional biotechnology policy and strategy. She described a bottom-up approach involving stakeholder meetings in six representative countries and an effort to fit the regional policy within the content of other regional priorities, such as the regional agricultural policy. She ended with her thoughts on implementation considerations after the document is adopted by CARICOM.

The discussion focused on three general questions. First, the audience was asked what are the general advantages or benefits to regional guidelines. The major points that were raised in the discussion were the following:

- Efficiency (reduces costs and share resources)
- Allow for regional trade
- Harmonization of technical requirements, regulatory procedures, and legislation

¹ This is the summary report of the parallel session organized by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) on the third day of the FAO international technical conference on Agricultural Biotechnologies in Developing Countries (ABDC-10) that took place in Guadalajara, Mexico on 1-4 March 2010 (<http://www.fao.org/biotech/abdc/parallel/en>).

- The fact that regional risk assessment could lead to approval in multiple countries
- Building and sharing capacity
- Incentive for product development, investment, market access

The participants then discussed the hurdles to establishing regional guidelines. The points that were raised included:

- The fact that different countries are at different stages of development
- Countries want to maintain autonomy in the decision process
- Potential conflict with pre-existing laws and regulations
- Needed cooperation by many different ministries
- Lack of a GMO product to test the system
- The need for political commitment
- The establishment of a regional secretariat to carry out the policy/guidelines (regional infrastructure)

Finally, the participants addressed which priorities that need tackling at the regional level. The interventions focused on the following:

- Capacity building -- human resource and also infrastructure
- Financial sustainability of the regional guidelines
- An effective regional body
- Education of national decision makers; and
- Quantitative (cost benefit) analysis related to the value of the regional guidelines.