

REGIONAL, SUBREGIONAL AND INTERREGIONAL PROJECTS

To date, FAO has implemented four biosafety capacity building projects at regional and subregion level in:

- **Asia (Asia BioNet) - participating country: Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet Nam.**
- **Eastern Europe - participating countries: Armenia, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.**
- **Latin America (MERCOSUR Ampliado) - participating countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.**
- **Near East and North Africa (NENA) - participating countries: Jordan, Lebanon, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.**

Of the four, the one for Asia has been completed and is moving towards Phase II; two are at an advanced stage of implementation (Eastern Europe and MERCOSUR ampliado); and the NENA project has just started. In addition, a subregional project for biosafety capacity building in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has been formulated and submitted to the Global Environmental Fund (GEF) for funding. Participating countries are Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon.

Building on the similarities of the countries within the regions/subregions (shared borders, economic interests, strong trade relations, including imports of food products), the projects aim at promoting collaboration, facilitating harmonization of biosafety



guiding principles, regulatory frameworks, standards and guidelines, and sharing the limited available human and infrastructural resources.

While the responsibility for formulating national biosafety policies and legislation lies with national governments, each country needs well-established capacities to develop a regulatory framework with a solid institutional base, and enforce regulations. It is equally evident that subregional/regional collaboration and harmonization in biosafety can offer important opportunities of mutual benefit and determine consistent environmental and economic gains, not least the attraction of funding and investments.

In the case of Asian BioNet, diversity in the levels of development of national biosafety systems in the participating countries represented both a challenge and an opportunity.

While the disparities hindered equitable participation in regional/subregional activities, they provided nevertheless opportunities for collaboration and enabled countries with least developed biosafety systems to learn from those with more advanced systems¹³.

For MERCOSUR Ampliado, the disparities among countries' biosafety operational contexts are less remarkable. The initial dialogue and information exchange was slow but improved markedly in the course of project execution, leading to the achievement of the expected outcomes, namely increased cooperation, creation of shared understanding, development of common tools and procedures that will possibly be adopted by the participating countries.

Within the NENA project, collaboration in GMO detection and monitoring among national reference GMO laboratories is supported



¹³ Sonnino A. (2008) *FAO regional project on Capacity Building in Biosafety of GM crops in Asia*. Biosafety Protocol News, vol. 3, no. 5, pp. 8-9, <http://www.cbd.int/doc/newsletters/>.

so as to harmonize activities and certification schemes based on common standards and good practices. Such collaboration is expected to be formalized through an agreement for the establishment of the 'regional platform for GMO detection', taking into account subregional and regional specificities and interests. As a result, many more countries in the area have put forward requests to expand the project and become involved.

Finally, recommendations for a subregional strategy on agricultural biotechnology were provided as part of the project involving Armenia, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova.

At subregional level, a series of training activities were carried out in the Caribbean, Middle East and Central and Eastern Europe on technical and managerial issues.

As part of an interregional project, training in various aspects of biosafety is being provided to scientists and decision-makers from Eastern Europe and Central Asia and from 2006 to 2008 three training workshops were organized in the Czech Republic.



EXPERIENCE GAINED AND THE WAY FORWARD

- Regional and subregional harmonization of standards, guidelines, protocols and methodologies is highly recommended when countries share borders, socio-economic interests and trade relations.
- The creation of regional/subregional networks represents an economic opportunity, fostering resources pooling, economies of scale and international coordination. In the specific case of NENA, it could reduce dependency and costs associated with GMO detection activities, as well as generate additional resources through the charges from the services provided by the reference laboratories.

- Regional/subregional networks support the involved countries in:
 - sharing information and experience;
 - harmonizing means and methods for handling GMOs;
 - reducing the costs of specific activities, e.g. GMO detection;
 - exchanging technical protocols and guidelines;
 - practicing double verification methods;
 - creating critical mass of expertise in the area;
 - establishing common certification schemes;
 - harmonizing policies, regulation, and trade practices (forms, administrative fulfilments, etc.).
- A regional/subregional approach tends to attract more funding from private and public donors/funding agencies (including development banks).
- There is a need to synchronize the national, subregional and regional dimensions of biosafety capacity building. Regional and subregional collaboration in biosafety should be further promoted and expanded through regional and subregional projects, and well coordinated with national biosafety capacity building efforts.

