Africa in the News
Eastern African Dialogue on Biotechnology Policy

A wide range of stakeholders – including from government, intergovernmental organisations, civil society groups, academia, industry and the media – from the Eastern African region met in Uganda to address the formulation of coherent, informed and inclusive biotechnology policies on trade and sustainable development at the national, regional and multilateral levels. Many countries in Eastern Africa are in the process of formulating their national policies and strategies related to biotechnology ,and translating them into national and regional approaches and multilateral negotiating positions.

The need to respond and adapt to the international developments – including a myriad of trade interests, obligations and pressures – threatens to dominate national agendas. This raises the urgent need for understanding and asserting the space for domestic policy-making in biotechnology supportive of the countries' self-defined sustainable development objectives.

The group asked African governments to be more proactive in analysing and identifying their short, medium and long term needs, policy gaps and priorities. These priorities should ideally be developed with the participation of relevant actors in the public and the private sectors. Countries' policies and strategies for biotechnology development should be based on clearly identified public policy objectives that are specific and formulated through participatory processes. These could include:

⇒   Ensuring food security, including access to safe and sufficient food

⇒   Increase agricultural productivity, rural development and poverty alleviation

⇒   Promote economic growth through diversification in to high-value products and technological development

⇒   Promoting public health and food safety

⇒   Conserve, sustainably use and equitably share the benefits of biodiversity

Achieving these objectives will entail addressing and integrating a range of policy areas and instruments in order to develop a coherent biotechnology policy framework that were outlined in detail. Action on these policy instruments will be required at both the national and regional levels. At the *regional level*, partnerships, such as NEPAD, and regional economic agreements should be considered as a means to achieving developmental goals. Commercial considerations should be balanced by social, environmental and cultural objectives.

Successful implementation of domestic, regional and international policies and regulations can only be achieved through integration, coordination and cooperation among all stakeholders. This will involve raising awareness of the risks and benefits of biotechnology and promoting official national multi-stakeholder consultation processes that include networks of farmers associations and civil society groups. All parties concerned with science and technology – industrial leaders and researchers, academia, financial institutions and the government – should also be engaged to determine, over a period, the technological course and needs for their country.

To support technology upgrading in Eastern African countries, governments must put in place institutional mechanisms for comprehensively evaluating and setting science and technology priorities and making sure responsibility for relevant policies is coordinated between ministries and institutions.

National and regional biotechnology policies will need to be integrated with trade obligations (eg WTO rules) and trade interests.

One of the main constraints affecting the implementation of effective biotech regulations and the development of biotechnology has been inadequate funding. Governments should review and adapt laws and commercial regulations to enhance funding for biotechnology policy-making and development.

Eastern African Dialogue on Biotechnology Policy-making, Trade and Sustainable Development was held from 15-17 February 2006 in Jinja, Uganda. It was organised by the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) and the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS). It was co-hosted by the African Union (AU) and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).