

Africa needs collaboration, not harmonization to benefit from biotechnology transformation



Africa does not need to harmonize its biosafety laws before enjoying the benefits of the ongoing agricultural revolution powered by biotechnology.

Those remarks were made in Nairobi, Kenya, by Dr Rufus Ebegba, a biosafety expert and former Director General of Nigeria's [National Biosafety Management Agency](#), during a panel discussion on mainstreaming biotechnology in Africa's agriculture at the inaugural [African Conference on Agricultural Technologies](#) (ACAT).

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Extensive collaboration and co-creation

"In the last decade, African countries have been struggling with strategies to implement a wholistic program that would harmonize the various country-specific laws into regional and continental-wide laws, but unfortunately, we have not made progress, and this has not only retarded progress but shown that it is not a path to take," he said. "The establishment of nascent agencies and policies is possible through extensive collaboration and co-creation with multiple and diverse stakeholders, as has been the case in establishing the biosafety regime in Nigeria."

He added that it was important for organizations such as the [African Agricultural Technology Foundation](#) (AATF) to develop strategies capable of helping African countries that do not have biosafety laws to establish such laws that are friendly and constructive towards biotechnology deployment.

"Research on biotechnology in Africa shows glaring deficiencies"

Dr Titus Alicai, Director of Research and Postgraduate Studies at Uganda's [National Agricultural Research Organisation](#) (NARO), said that research on biotechnology in Africa shows some glaring deficiencies in capacity across the continent. "Biotechnology training has spread impressively in some areas, including as part of revised curricula, degree programs, and regulator training on biosafety. When you train scientists and not engage them locally, they will migrate to countries where they can get better opportunities, hence the need to develop infrastructure for practice for the scientists on the continent," Dr Alicai said.

Prof Abdullahi Mustapha, Director General of Nigeria's [National Biotechnology Development Agency](#), said that Africa lacked major foundational elements for the people to see biotechnology results like biotech infrastructure, manpower, and sufficient capacity. "If governments provide a platform by allowing industry to support research activities and put resources in it, research institutions can create better infrastructure and capacity to promote biotechnological products."

Patience Koku, the chief executive of [Replenish Farms, Nigeria](#), noted that farming remained challenging worldwide but more so in Africa because of the absence of technologies. "We should use already established channels, like the seed companies, as a pathway to ensure that biotechnology and its products get down to the smallholder farmers because the farmers will always want the right product," Patience said.

Better regulation needed

Earlier, Vitumbiko Chinoko of the [Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology](#) (OFAB) at AATF said biotechnology has huge potential for the African continent. However, opportunities for better regulation needed to be provided to ensure the continent benefits correctly from the technology.

He said that AATF, through OFAB, was facilitating an enabling environment for optimal decision-making for agricultural biotech. "Conversations about agricultural biotechnology are influenced more by public opinion rather than science, and perception does not exactly give the true picture," he said.

"Main actors in biotechnology are acting in silos, and that means shared visions and collaborated information is lacking. Communication, education, and knowledge sharing are important and should target getting the benefits to the farmer. We have shifted the narrative of communicating biotechnology from defending biotechnology to owning the narrative, a major shift in strategy."

From development to product commercialization

Other necessary strategies, according to him, include providing a platform for stakeholders to showcase their contribution to advancing science and technological innovations in the agricultural sector is crucial, raising the visibility of issues of concern around innovative technology access and delivery among the continent's top leadership including policymakers for their information and to guide decision-making; developing a roadmap to support the advancement of agricultural technologies from development to product commercialization; and promoting networking, collaboration, and shared learning on agricultural biotechnology.

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