

The FAO International Technical Conference on Agricultural Biotechnologies in Developing Countries, 1- 4 March 2010, Mexico

The FAO International Technical Conference on Agricultural Biotechnologies in Developing Countries (ABDC): Options and Opportunities in Crops, Forestry, Livestock, Fisheries and Agro-industry to face the Challenges of Food Insecurity and Climate Change was held in Guadalajara, Mexico from 1 to 4 March 2010. The Conference hosted by the Government of Mexico and co-sponsored by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) and World Bank were major partners in this initiative. A major objective of the Conference was to take stock of the application of biotechnologies across the different food and agricultural sectors in developing countries, in order to learn from the past and to identify options for the future to face the challenges of food insecurity, climate change and natural resource degradation. The Conference brought together about 300 policy-makers, scientists and representatives of intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations from 68 countries, including governmental delegations nominated by 42 FAO Member States, as well as Regional Fora.

The introductory remarks were delivered by FAO and the Government of Mexico stressing the importance of the Conference indicating that agriculture needed improved technologies and tools to meet the challenges imposed by global food insecurity and poverty. A keynote address on behalf of Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, Chair of the Conference Steering Committee highlighted that biodiversity is the feedstock not only for food and health security, but also for the management of climate change.

South-South collaboration in technology transfer aspects of the multilateral system of the international treaty on plant genetic resources for food and agriculture underlined by Dr. Shakeel Bhatti, Secretary of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. He presented an overview of the International Treaty, which entered into force in 2004, and described the scope of the International Treaty and progress made in its implementation, including the use of a Standard Material Transfer Agreement that is being widely used. A series of regional parallel sessions of Latin America and the Caribbean; Near East and North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa; Asia and the Pacific; and Eastern Europe and Central Asia regions were held with the scope to address the potential role of biotechnologies for agricultural development.

AARINENA delegation who participated in the WANA

parallel session included the Coordinator of Agricultural Biotechnology Network, Dr. Osama Momtaz; Dr. Ahmad Abdul Kader from the General Commission for Scientific Agricultural Research (GCSAR) of Syria; and Dr. Michael Baum from ICARDA. Dr. Alexander Percy Smith acted as a facilitator for the session. Three speakers presented the Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) in the field of modern agricultural biotechnology in WANA to face the challenges of food insecurity and climate change. The first part presented by Dr. Osama Momtaz dealt with the characteristics of WANA region with several development problems including poverty, lack of gainful livelihoods, shortage of water, droughts and desertification. It also included the AARINENA mission, the geographical distribution of the AARINENA Networks, and reviewed the current status of biotechnology applications in WANA Region. The second part of the presentation was delivered by Dr. Ahmad Abdul Kader, dealt with the SWOT analysis of agricultural biotechnology in the region. The third part was presented by Dr. Michael Baum and dealt with the SWOT analysis of livestock biotechnology in the WANA region. The SWOT analysis gave the following main results: a) strengths: WANA region has some well-equipped laboratories, trained personnel, an Agri-biotech Network, several centers of biodiversity and some centers of excellence; b) weaknesses: a lack of public awareness and poor communication about biotechnology, a lack of regional cooperation and harmonization of bio-safety regulations; c) opportunities: international organizations are in a strong position to contribute, a considerable potential for private sector involvement, develop a regional bio-safety regulatory framework tailoring national priorities; d) threats: political instability and the socio-economic situation may be a threat in the region, a risk posed by GMOs on biodiversity, absence of regional policy and national strategies.

The Conference concluded that agricultural biotechnologies encompass a wide-range of tools and methodologies that are being applied to help alleviate hunger and poverty, assist in adaptation to climate change and maintain the natural resource base; the agricultural biotechnologies have not been widely used in many developing countries and should be focused on the needs of smallholder farmers and consumers; governments need to develop their own national vision and policy for the role of biotechnologies within the context of national strategies, objectives and programs; effective communication and participation strategies are necessary to promote public involvement and empowerment in the development and use of biotechnologies.