

OVERVIEW OF BIOTECHNOLOGY IN MALAWI

The overall coordination of biotechnology research and development is vested in the National Research Council of Malawi. The Malawi government has adopted a positive attitude towards biotechnology and is taking appropriate steps to reap the benefits offered by the technology. Members of the GMO Regulatory committee underwent training in handling GMO applications and risk assessment and management.

Currently there is no genetic modification taking place in any lab in the country. However, the use of molecular markers for research is taking place at Chancellor College at the University of Malawi and by the Malaria Project. Currently there are no GM field trials taking place but a Cassava application was submitted in 2004 to the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Food Security.

Human and infrastructure capacity is low but there are a few labs and trained personnel. Malawi is participating in capacity-building efforts such as UNEP-GEF: the UNEP-GEF Pilot Biosafety Enabling Activity Project; UNEP-GEF Project on Development of National Biosafety Frameworks; and has participated in a number of regional projects like SARB and AfricaBio Projects.

Malawi is a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity and signed the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety on the 24th of May 2000, although the Protocol has not yet been ratified. In line with the requirements of the Protocol, the Malawi Parliament enacted the Biosafety Act in October 2002. The Act centres mainly on GMOs and is administered by the Minister of the Environment.

At present Malawi is in the process of developing a National Biotechnology Policy which will develop a vision and strategies for biotechnology development in the country. The policy will also propose an institutional framework and enabling legislation for biotechnology in the country. This may lead to a review of the Biosafety Act (2002). In addition, the government established a GMO Regulatory Committee in 2003 and formulated GMO guidelines and regulations through stakeholder consultation in 2004. There is a Biosafety Regulatory framework in place but it still needs to be tested.

The general public in Malawi is cautiously optimistic about the role of agricultural biotechnology. This is because Malawi had a positive experience with biotechnology during the food crisis of 2001/2002 when the country received food aid that contained GM maize and no safety incidents were reported. This experience has helped to raise debate in the country on the risks and benefits of GM technology. However, the level of biotech awareness in Malawi is still low though a number of sensitisation activities and workshops have been done in the country and government is engaging in public consultation and communication to raise general awareness.