



## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Assuring the agricultural and food safety of genetically modified organisms in southern Africa**

GMASSURE, an action of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Science and Technology Programme, has concluded its first year of operation with the hosting of two successful biosafety capacity-building workshops in Namibia and Zimbabwe.

This action, coordinated by the University of Pretoria, includes industry and university partners in South Africa (the Agricultural Research Council, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and the University of Johannesburg), Namibia (the University of Namibia), Zimbabwe (the University of Zimbabwe) and Denmark (the Technical University of Denmark). It is funded mainly by the European Union by means of a grant to the value of over R11.8 million, supported by co-funding of just over R1 million from the Department of Science and Technology, as well as almost R150 000 from each of the seven partner institutions.

This action was initiated due to a need that was identified to address the lack of widespread knowledge concerning biotechnology, and food and agricultural biosafety. Through the activities of GMASSURE, government officials, policy makers and scientists in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region will be provided with the knowledge required to make informed decisions about the acceptance of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Misinformation in the public domain will also be addressed by providing consumers, the general public and religious groups, among others, with objective information about the agricultural and food safety of GMOs.

GMASSURE was launched with a two-day inaugural symposium held in Pretoria in July 2014, which was attended by various stakeholders, including scientists, government officials, academics and farmers. During the symposium, the objective of the action was presented to delegates; which is to facilitate informed decision-making on the use of GMOs in agriculture and food by enhancing the knowledge of stakeholders. Presentations were made by a wide range of stakeholders involved in biosafety training and regulation on the importance of genetically modified crops and their commercialisation in Southern Africa. The symposium included a discussion about regional cooperation and what would be expected of member states to advance the debate on biotechnology.

The symposium was followed by two biosafety capacity-building workshops, which were attended by delegates from the various SADC countries. The first was held in Windhoek, Namibia, from 17 to 21 November 2014, and the second was held in Harare, Zimbabwe, from 16 to 20 March 2015.

These workshops focused on building the capacity of scientists, policy makers, regulators, farmers and other key stakeholders. Participants were introduced to biosafety and biotechnology, as well as the implications of the technology for developing countries, and had the opportunity to present the status of biotechnology and biosafety developments in their respective countries. The relevant regulatory systems that are in place in the different countries, as well as international frameworks were discussed at length.

A number of further workshops are being planned for the near future, including training on food safety, with particular application to GMOs (23 to 25 November), addressing cultural and religious issues, the application of '-omics' to biosafety, the impact of new biotechnologies, and science communication (2 to 3 September). Interactive workshops are also being planned between partners from Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

For more information on the GMASSURE action on assuring the agricultural and food safety of genetically modified organisms in southern Africa, please contact the Project Manager, Ella Nyakunu at [ella.nyakunu@up.ac.za](mailto:ella.nyakunu@up.ac.za).

The central GMASSURE Office is located on the Experimental Farm of the University of Pretoria, South Africa.