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Letter from the Editor

The year has passed its halfway mark and GMASSURE has achieved a number of its goals by attending the ACP Joint Stakeholder Conference in Brussels, Belgium, and engaging in other visibility actions.

Throughout the rest of the year, the Action will continue to focus on raising awareness of the importance of appropriate biosafety regulations and biosafety risk analysis among key stakeholders.

Ella Nyakunu
Editor

Joint Stakeholder Conference fosters networking

GMASSURE partners, Dr John Becker from the University of Pretoria and Prof Martha Kandawa-Schulz from the University of Namibia, attended the Joint Stakeholder Conference in Brussels, Belgium, from 5 to 6 July 2016. The conference was organised by the Technical Assistance Unit (TAU) of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Science and Technology Programme, the ACP Caribbean and Pacific Research Programme for Sustainable Development and the EDULINK programme (an ACP-European Union (EU) cooperation programme in higher education).

The Conference took the form of plenary and parallel sessions, as well as poster presentations. Delegates had the opportunity to view GMASSURE's project poster during lunch and tea breaks.

During sessions, key issues, completed projects, lessons learned, challenges, project results, future impact pathways and perspectives beyond the projects were discussed.

For Dr Becker, Session 5 was the highlight of the Conference, as it pertained to how projects will build on the platform provided by the three programmes.

Alternative approaches, maintained networks and the improved capacity of higher education institutions were mentioned as goals to be achieved after the projects.



Delegates attend a session at the 2016 Joint Stakeholder Conference.

To Prof Kandawa-Schulz, it seems as if the problems faced in Southern Africa in terms of infrastructure, funding or commitment from governments are experienced everywhere.

Many donors can only fund research, and governments or institutions have to build the laboratories, which poses challenges in many countries.

GMASSURE is to continue encouraging collaborations between institutions in its network.

This will assist in supervising students and sharing equipment, as some institutions do not have the relevant instruments to conduct research.

Conferences like these are beneficial to GMASSURE as it allows stakeholders from across the world to collaborate on how they can share the knowledge gained and discuss the way forward.



Dates to diarise

In 2016, GMASSURE is planning a number of exciting events that aim to meet the Action's objective of empowering stakeholders. These events include a workshop on navigating cultural and religious issues in relation to GMOs, and a workshop on the impact of new biotechnologies. A number of interactive workshops are also planned to take place in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

- **20 to 21 July 2016:**
Cultural and Religious Issues Workshop (South Africa)
- **25 July 2016:**
Cultural and Religious Issues Workshop (Zimbabwe)
- **15 August 2016:**
Cultural and Religious Issues Workshop (Namibia)
- **5 September 2016:**
Interactive Workshop (South Africa)
- **26 September 2016:**
Interactive Workshop (Namibia)
- **11 October 2016:**
Interactive Workshop (Zimbabwe)

New joint ACP website

A new joint website featuring the EDULINK II, African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Science and Technology Programme II and the ACP Caribbean and Pacific Research Programme for Sustainable Development was launched on 11 July 2016.

The website contains news and information regarding these programmes, as well as all the latest updates concerning ACP and European Union higher education and research initiatives. It will also act as a repository for all the documentation, outputs and results generated by the funded projects.

New features include enhanced search options to facilitate the location of information by various search criteria, such as by country or region, subject area or institution.

You can find the new website at
<http://www.acp-hestre.eu/>

Information about forthcoming events will be posted on the website as it becomes available.

Meet biotechnology reporter, Sifelani Tsiko

Sifelani Tsiko is a senior writer for sister publications *The Herald* and *The Southern Times*, which are jointly run by Zimpapers and New Era of Namibia. He has spent more than 15 years in the media environment in Zimbabwe. In recent years, he has played an integral role in combating misinformation regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Southern Africa.

Sifelani's interests include biotechnology, climate change, the environment, science and technology, rural development and other human development issues.

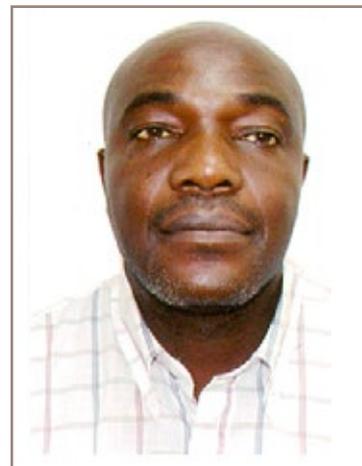
His work has been guided by the desire to provide in-depth and balanced examinations of facts. He has a taste for on-site reporting

and advocacy journalism, especially with regard to his areas of interest and how they affect the poor.

He worked as a journalist at *The Herald*, the largest daily newspaper in Zimbabwe, where he covered politics and the general news desk. He became interested in biotechnology in 2005 after

attending a workshop on GMOs and biotechnology in Botswana.

His growing interest and fascination with biotechnology was further piqued by the honest opinions of renowned Zimbabwean biochemist, Prof Idah Sithole-Niang of the University of Zimbabwe,



and Doreen Shumba-Mnyulwa, an agricultural expert at the Regional Agricultural and Environmental Initiatives Network Africa (RAEIN Africa).



The importance of training opportunities

Since its inception, GMASSURE has aimed to disseminate information regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and how they can contribute to the fight against malnutrition in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). To this end, the Action provides training opportunities to empower stakeholders to combat misinformation about GMOs. The Action was pleased to hear of a case where its training has made a tangible difference in the way stakeholders engage with the contentious issue of GMOs.

Sifelani Tsiko, a journalist from Zimbabwe (see page 2), has gained much from GMASSURE's training opportunities.

He currently reports on a variety of topics, but he mainly focuses on biotechnology, climate change, the environment, science and technology, and rural development. He is employed by *The Southern Times*.

He has written many articles concerning GMOs and he is focused on presenting the public with the facts.

His latest article in *The Southern Times* focuses on how Europe's views on GMOs slow the development of biotechnology in Southern Africa (read the article at <http://southernafrican.news/2016/06/29/eu-position-on-gmos-a-blow-to-sadcs-food-security/>).

Sifelani was exposed to GMOs when the Regional Agricultural and Environmental Initiatives Network Africa (RAEIN Africa) invited him to a workshop on GMOs and biotechnology in Botswana in 2005.

Debates between proponents and opponents of GMOs also caught his attention.

His close interaction with a Zimbabwean biochemist at the University of Zimbabwe, Prof Christopher Chetsanga, further opened the flood-gates of his passion for biotechnology.

He learned the basic biotechnology skills and techniques from Prof Chetsanga and Prof Idah Sithole-Niang, also from the University of Zimbabwe. This later reinforced his interest in science as a journalist.

For years, while he worked as a journalist at another newspaper, he felt that his career was unfocused and was not heading in the direction he wanted it to go. He felt that politics was too limiting.

He says his exposure to numerous workshops on biotechnology and GMO-related issues have been very beneficial.

They developed his confidence in working with scientists and writing about very technical subjects. With all the knowledge and experience he has gained in the GMASSURE media training programme, he can surely say that he is very comfortable sharing knowledge and facts regarding GMO topics.

He also feels confident to explore new techniques for

covering emerging trends in biotechnology in Africa and elsewhere in the world. As a journalist, he appreciates the continued support and guidance of GMASSURE and its partners in providing him with another avenue of learning and providing opportunities for reporting on biotechnology issues, a topic that only has a tiny pool of reporters in Zimbabwe.

"GMASSURE has made an impact on me and this will no doubt play a major role in my desire to shift to a new career path in the near future," says Sifelani. He remains open to any new knowledge and skills that will strengthen his capacity to report on biotechnology issues in a better and more credible way, so as to make complex issues more accessible to policy makers and the public.



Nobel Prize laureates take a stand for GMOs

Some 110 Nobel Prize laureates have signed a letter urging Greenpeace to end its opposition to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The letter asks Greenpeace to stop hindering the introduction of golden rice, a genetically engineered strain of rice that could reduce the vitamin A deficiencies that cause blindness and death in children in developing countries.

The letter campaign was organised by Richard Roberts, Chief Scientific Officer of New England Biolabs, and Phillip Sharp, the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for the discovery of genetic sequences known as introns.

Roberts said that he endorses many other activities of Greenpeace, and said he hopes the group, after reading the letter, would "admit that this is an issue that they got wrong and that they would focus on the stuff that they do well."

Nobel Prize Laureate Randy Schekman, a cell biologist at the University of California, Berkeley, said, "I find it surprising that groups that are very supportive of science when it comes to global climate change, or even – for the most part – in the appreciation of the value of vaccination in preventing human disease, can be so dismissive of the general views of scientists when it comes to something as important as the world's agricultural future."

The letter states that scientific and regulatory agencies around the world have repeatedly and consistently found crops and foods improved through biotechnology to be as safe as, if not safer than, those derived from any other method of production.

The World Health Organization estimates that 250 million people suffer from a vitamin A deficiency, including 40% of children under five in the developing world.

Based on the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) statistics, one to two million preventable

deaths occur annually as a result of a vitamin A deficiency, because it compromises the immune system and puts babies and children at great risk. Vitamin A deficiency itself is the leading cause of childhood blindness globally. It affects 250 000 to 500 000 children each year. Half of these affected children die within 12 months of losing their eyesight.

This debate between mainstream scientists and environmental activists is not new and there is little reason to suspect that the letter signed by the Nobel Prize laureates will persuade GMO opponents to stand down.

However, Columbia University's Martin Chalfie, who shared the 2008 Nobel Prize for Chemistry for research on green fluorescent protein, said he thinks laureates can be influential on the GMO issue.

"Is there something special about Nobel Prize laureates? I'm not so sure we're any more special than other scientists who have looked at the evidence involved, but we have considerably more visibility because of the Prize. I think that this behooves us, that when we feel that science is not being listened to, we speak out."

Roberts said he has worked on previous campaigns that sought to leverage the influence of Nobel Prize laureates.

In 2012, for example, he organised a campaign to persuade Chinese authorities to release Liu Xiaobo, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and human rights activist, from house arrest.



Golden rice is said to be the solution to vitamin A deficiency in developing countries.

Roberts said he decided to take on the GMO issue after hearing from fellow scientists that their research was being impeded by anti-GMO activism from Greenpeace and other organisations.

Greenpeace's Wilhelmina Pelegrina, who is a campaigner at Greenpeace in Southeast Asia, responded to the letter: "Accusations that anyone is blocking genetically engineered 'golden' rice are false." She claims that golden rice has failed as a solution and is not currently available for sale, even after more than 20 years of research.

She also says, "The only guaranteed solution to fix malnutrition is a diverse, healthy diet."

With regard to the development of golden rice, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) states that the results of the first round of multi-location trials of golden rice showed that beta-carotene

was produced at consistently high levels in the grain, and that grain quality was comparable to the conventional variety.

Golden rice versions, such as GR2-E and others, are being assessed.

IRRI and the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) are conducting screenhouse and confined field trials. All biosafety and other regulatory protocols are being followed.

Golden rice will only be made available broadly to farmers and consumers if it is successfully developed into suitable rice varieties that are approved by national regulators and shown to improve the vitamin A status in communities.

If golden rice is found to be safe and efficient, a sustainable delivery programme will ensure that it is acceptable and accessible to those most in need.