

Media Release

Nairobi, Kenya November 13 2014

“The planet needs more plant scientists” African educators meet in Nairobi to develop educational tools for a next generation of African plant breeders

Educators of plant breeders in Africa are meeting in Nairobi this week to develop new education and training materials for “*Demand led plant variety design*”. The educators from several African universities, regional and international organizations are sharing experiences across eastern, southern and West Africa on the content and organization of current plant breeding courses and future needs. They are benefiting from the participation of plant breeders from the private sector who work in a market driven environment.

The new educational materials will be based on demand-led R&D. They will be available for inclusion in post graduate programs in African universities. The course materials will also be available for continuing professional development of practicing plant breeders; and they will be made available on line for open and distance learning, thus extending the reach of the new knowledge Africa-wide.

Dr Appolinaire Djikeng, Director of *Biosciences eastern and central Africa* – International Livestock Research Institute (*BecA-ILRI*) Hub, Nairobi, said: “The planet needs more plant scientists. Over the past decade, there has been rapid growth in the numbers of biomedical scientists but no growth at all in the total number of plant scientists. Yet the demand for increasing quantities and higher quality, safe and nutritious food will double over the next 50 years. The *BecA-ILRI* Hub is giving a strong focus to strengthening plant breeding in Africa. As a shared research platform, the *BecA-ILRI* Hub makes available the tools for modern plant breeding to plant breeders, especially those working on staple food crops “

Dr Pangirayi Tongoona and Dr Agyemang Danquah, the delegates of the West African Centre for Crop Improvement (WACCI) at the University of Ghana said: “WACCI is very pleased to be associated with the development of these new education and training modules on demand-led plant variety development. We believe plant breeding should be driven by stakeholder demand and this will enhance adoption of new varieties. The inclusion of demand-led approaches to variety design will help educate young African plant breeders on the importance of understanding changing customer demands when setting targets and traits to include in their national crop breeding programs. ”

Dr Heather Merk Program Lead for the Syngenta Plant Breeding Academy described the continuing education program that she leads within the Syngenta company. Dr Merk said “Continuing education and professional development of plant breeders is critically important. In the US, the National Association of Plant Breeders (NAPB) is a respected professional organization that brings together plant breeders from the public and private sectors in the US, where (pre) plant breeding in the universities is very important. I see a similar situation in countries in Africa, where having continuing professional development available to plant breeders in both the public and private sectors will contribute to the development of market driven, well adapted and widely adopted new plant varieties of the major food crops in Africa”.

Background

Demand led Plant Variety Design

The project on “*Demand led plant variety design*” is the first project being supported by a new Alliance on R&D for food security, formed by the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture (SFSA), the Australian International Food Security Research Centre of the Australian International Agricultural Research Centre (AIFSRC/ACIAR) and the Crawford Fund).

The educators’ meeting is an important part of a new project on “*Demand led plant variety design*”, which is addressing how to make new plant varieties being developed in Africa more responsive to changing customer demands and more widely adopted by farmers. The new project covers three aspects: 1. Demand led plant variety design; 2. Education and training of plant breeders; and 3. Policy and institutions required to support the breeding, distribution and adoption of higher performing crop varieties across Africa. The Project Co-leaders are Dr Vivienne Anthony from the Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, Basel, Switzerland (Vivienne.anthony@syngenta.com) and Dr Gabrielle Persley from the University of Queensland Global Change Institute, Brisbane Australia g.persley@doylefoundation.org .

Partners in the Alliance for Agricultural R&D for Food Security

The AIFSRC is an entity established by the Australian Government in the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) to accelerate the delivery of research innovations for food security. The AIFSRC aims to support research to accelerate the uptake of new technologies; and understanding and resolving constraints to dissemination and adoption of new technologies. It has a focus on exploring different partnership models to achieve effective implementation, delivery and communication of the adoption of agricultural research for development.

The Crawford Fund is a Canberra based entity whose purpose is to make more widely known the benefits that accrue both to Australia and the developing world from investment in international agricultural research and development. The CF conducts public awareness activities, commissions studies on research policy and practices related to its mission and arranges specialist training activities in Australia and abroad for developing country scientists.

The Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture is a non-profit organisation based in Basel, Switzerland. Its mission is to create value for small farmers in developing countries by supporting innovation in sustainable agriculture and activation of value chains. It works with a wide range of partners operationally and in thought leadership. SFSA engages, for example, the public sector, international organizations, think tanks, the private sector, other foundations, social entrepreneurs, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As well as establishing pilot projects, the Foundation also puts major emphasis on successful scale-up.

The Global Change Institute at The University of Queensland, Australia, is an independent source of research, ideas and advice for addressing the challenges of global change. GCI advances discovery, creates solutions and advocates responses that meet the challenges presented by climate change, technological innovation and population change. Measured through a combination of three key global university rankings, UQ is currently ranked in the top 100 of all universities worldwide and is a founding member of the Australian Group of Eight (Go8) universities. The University of Queensland Global Change Institute is the program manager of the Demand led plant variety design project, on behalf of the partners.

Contacts

In Africa

Biosciences eastern and central Africa (BecA-ILRI Hub)

Appolinaire Djikeng, BecA-ILRI Hub Director a.djikeng@cgiar.org

Ethel Makila, Communication Officer, BecA-ILRI Hub e.makila@cgiar.org

West Africa Crop improvement Centre (WACCI), University of Ghana

Agyemang Danquah adanquah@wacci.edu.gh

In Australia

Crawford Fund, Canberra Australia

Cathy Reade, Director Communications Cathy.reade@crawfordfund.org

In Switzerland

Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture

Basel Switzerland Paul Castle Communications Director paul.castle@syngenta.com