



Malawi RABSAC policy brief

By

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1. Introduction

Many developing countries, and particularly African countries, are at crossroads on making a decision regarding biotechnology and more specifically agricultural biotechnology and related products like genetically modified (GM) crops. The pace at which SADC countries are engaging in modern agricultural biotechnology is a cautious and precautionary one. This is partly caused by a lag in their own biosafety internal policy and regulatory capacities as well as a fear of losing international export markets if GM crops are adopted or accepted. Conversely, the opportunity cost of not adopting GM crops might be high for the SADC countries. Impressive GM crop adoption rates in South Africa suggest that large- and small-scale African farmers can benefit from GM crops. The potential income gains associated with the first wave of technologies are significant and countries with a moratorium on GM crop imports also stand to lose out on much needed emergency food aid from organisations like the World Food Programme. Even and maybe especially countries who would like to remain GM free, for the time being, due to precaution or to enable them to produce for possible niche markets, need to develop a biosafety policy. Failure by the SADC countries to engage in the development of a biosafety policy and regulatory framework is likely to increase biotechnology and trade divide in the region.

The Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource, Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) has been facilitating a project called “Regional Approach to Biosafety for Southern African Countries” (RABSAC). This project is supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the International Food Policy Research Institute’s Programme for Biosafety Systems (PBS). The RABSAC project is part of a number of initiatives supported by PBS with the overall objective of documenting a balanced review of the technical information needed to inform regional biosafety policy choices responsibly.

For the period March 2005 to September 2006 the RABSAC project focused on three countries in SADC, namely Malawi, Mauritius and South Africa. These countries were

chosen because each presented a unique situation and thus case study. This policy brief summarises the policy issues that arose from the Malawi study.

The decision to accept GM food aid in Malawi during periods of acute food shortage and to formally welcome introduction of transgenic technology especially GM crops has sparked intense debate among all stakeholders. The stand of civil society organizations especially the Consumer Association of Malawi (CAMA) and Participatory, Ecological, and Land Use Management PELUM is essentially “No to GM”. The fears and reservations about consuming and introducing GM technology have been heightened by inadequate information of the likely effects of transgenic products to human and animal health. This is in spite of the fact that the Southern African region including Malawi has been consuming donated food likely to contain GM grain and that there has been no documented evidence of toxic side effects to human, animals and the environment. Furthermore, ex-ante analysis in Malawi and documented evidence in South Africa have shown that farmers would benefit from adopting GM technology in terms of improved yields and gross margin partly as a result of a reduction in loss resulting from pest and disease infestation associated with the technology.

Considering that the thrust of the new Government Policy in Malawi is to reorient the country’s development paradigm from a consumption based economy to a production based one, science and technology, especially biotechnology have been perceived as critical elements towards the attainment of this goal. In line with this paradigm shift plus the objective of ensuring household and national food security, it has been Government’s imperative that all forms of technology including GM should be explored to assist farmers in improving their productivity. In this regard, Malawi has drafted a policy which is geared towards promoting commercialisation of biotechnology and international trade in biotechnology products. The policy also aims at promoting free enterprise and international collaboration in biotechnology industry so that public agencies and private enterprises can become involved in research and development (R&D) and commercialisation of new biotechnology products and services.

Regulating imports of GM maize will not completely prevent entry of the product into Malawi considering the porosity of the border with neighbouring countries. In fact, it is likely that increased supply of GM maize either from South Africa and elsewhere will lead to a drastic reduction in prices, a condition that will encourage smuggling and informal cross border trade with neighbouring countries. Furthermore, lack of information about the extent to which maize and food aid imports destined for food insecure nations in Southern Africa in the 1990s and 2000s contained GM material serves as a warning that without developing national and regional policy, legislation and regulatory frameworks, food security programmes and technological development in agriculture in the SADC region, with the exception of South Africa, would be externally driven. It is therefore recommended that Governments in the SADC regional allocate resources to facilitate development of a Biotechnology Common Policy and Regulatory Framework (BCPRF). Against this background the following policy options for Malawi are proposed:

i. Harmonization of Regional Policies on Biotechnology.

Regulating imports of GM maize will not completely prevent entry of the product into Malawi considering the porosity of the border with neighbouring countries and the attractiveness of informal cross border trade. Furthermore, lack of information about the extent to which maize and food aid imports destined for food insecure nations in Southern Africa in the 1990s and 2000s contained GM material serves as a warning that without developing national and regional policy, legislation and regulatory frameworks, food security programmes and technological development in agriculture in the SADC region, with the exception of South Africa, would be externally driven.

- *It is therefore recommended that Governments in the SADC regional allocate resources to facilitate development of a Biotechnology Common Policy and Regulatory Framework (BCPRF) within the next two years.*

ii. Capacity Building

Considering that most countries in the SADC have unknowingly been importing and consuming GM maize due to lack of capacity to monitor transgenic commodities,

- *Governments should allocate sufficient resources to build technical and human capacity through acquisition of appropriate GM testing equipment and knowledge and skills development of commodity inspectors.*

iii. Awareness Campaign

Although the policy stance on commercialisation of biotechnology and international trade in biotechnology products is positive, debate on the risks of consuming GM maize is likely to continue as evidenced by the position taken by CAMA after national consultations on the draft Biotechnology Policy.

- *It is recommended that Government in collaboration with the private sector should mount awareness campaign to counter unfounded and negative publicity of transgenic commodities.*

iv. Biotech Information system

The uncertainty regarding health risks of GM food to humans and animals was orchestrated by lack of information and the absence of policy options on how to handle the product in emergencies and normal situations.

- *It is recommended that Government in collaboration with the private sector invest sufficiently in evidence based biotechnology information systems development through national research centres and policy analysis networks.*

v. Input Support and technical education

This implies that, improvement in income and food security through introduction of transgenic crops can only be achieved if the input constraint in terms of seed and fertilizer is addressed.

- *It is recommended that Government continues implementing a market friendly input support programmes through subsidies with a clearly defined exit strategy within the next five years.*
- *It is also recommended that Government in collaboration with the private sector should implement a coherent and coordinated demand driven farmer education programme to support the input support programme.*