

Uganda gives go-ahead to biotechnology policy

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Uganda's cabinet has approved its first National Biotechnology and Biosafety Policy, after eight years of deliberation.

The policy was approved last week (2 April), and provides objectives and guidelines for the promotion and regulation of biotechnology use in the country.

"The policy bears the guidelines on the legal, institutional and regulatory framework," Peter Ndemere, executive secretary of the state-run Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), told SciDev.Net.

But for the policy to be implemented, a bill must be presented to parliament and passed into a law — a process that could take many months.

"We've drafted a biotech bill for parliament to discuss and pass into law," says Ndemere. "In order to implement a law, you need a policy instrument, that's why the policy comes first."

He adds that the commercialisation of genetically modified (GM) crops requires this law. The guidelines in the policy also cover tissue and cell culture, medical diagnostics, industrial microbiology and biochemical engineering.

The policy was drafted by the state-run Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) with extensive consultation with farmers and consumer groups, university dons, policymakers and legislators leading to considerable re-shaping of the regulations.

Research into genetically modified crops is already underway in the country (see [Uganda approves Bt cotton trials](#)), overseen by the National Biosafety Committee, and researchers are hopeful that the approval of the policy will translate into law.

"Cabinet has made my day. They have provided this country with the necessary policy guidelines that shall give our research a proper way forward. Roles — which institution does what — have been well spelt out," says Andrew Kiggundu from the National Agricultural Biotechnology Centre in Kawanda, which is researching high-yield GM cotton and cassava.

Robert Anguzu of the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO), which was consulted on the bill, says the legislation allows Uganda to cope with rapid biotechnology developments in neighbouring Kenya.

"Kenya's genetically modified organisms would easily find their way into Uganda. If they found us unprepared, without regulations, it would be a big challenge to manage them when they're already with farmers and consumers," says Arthur Makara, Senior Science/Biosafety Officer and Secretary to the National Biosafety Committee.

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