

Getting some use out  
of drained brains – p20

**Zambia** Finally, some good news? p4

**David King** On DFID, despair and  
dealing a blow against poverty – p22

# Regionalising biotech— threat or solution?

## Nepad and Juma panel unite against critical stakeholders

**EXPERTS HAVE PROPOSED** a key biotechnology mission for each of Africa's regions where they think investment has the largest potential to boost development and nurture excellence. Drug development in the north, crops in the west, HIV-related diseases in the south, forestry in central parts, and environment and livestock in the east are the regional technology missions likely to be presented to African science ministers later this year.

The missions were identified by the high-level panel on biotechnology set up by the African Union and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad). "If African governments do this and promote mobility of researchers, we will start to get clustering [of excellence]," said Calestous Juma, chairman of the panel.

The panel had published a draft report ahead of a stakeholder meeting in Nairobi last month [see RA2, p5]. A chapter has since been drafted by officials at the Nepad secretariat in Pretoria and will be added to the report as a key proposal for science ministers to consider when they meet in November.

Should the ministers approve of the regional missions, they may draw up plans for boosting funding in these areas. Their recommendations would be passed on to the African heads of state summit in January.

But a few stakeholders at the meeting in Nairobi from 25 to 28 July were critical of the proposals. They were researchers and politicians who fear their institutes and countries will be starved of research funding if funding stops flowing into areas that fall outside the proposed regional agendas.

Aggrey Ambali, coordinator of the Nepad African Biosciences Initiative, said such concerns were unfounded, and that the recommendations were just an extension of common sense. "[The proposals are] not saying that we shouldn't put money into crops in

Southern Africa. It's just saying that, from the way we look at it, HIV/Aids is a critical issue in this region, so it can be taken up as a key area of investment for biotech."

It would not make sense for, say, West Africa to focus on HIV-related diseases, as the prevalence there is relatively low, he said. "What we are saying is that these are core missions, and then there will be complementary missions."

Ahmed Shembesh, director general at the Libyan National Centre for Standardization and Metrology, who also sits on the panel, said there was a need to convince institutes and decision makers that the regional missions were the way forward. "It will take some time," he admitted.

**HOWEVER, MANY** stakeholders were positive about the proposals. Walter Alhassan, West African coordinator of the Agricultural Biotechnology Support Project, said he was not worried about the region being starved of funds in areas outside crop biotechnology. "We are looking at both crops and livestock. But the crops angle is much stronger here in West Africa," he said.

One South African researcher said the proposals were unlikely to upset scientists in the country as its relatively large national science budget gives it leeway to invest in many areas of biotechnology. Kenya, on the other hand, which is strong in many areas of biotechnology but for which much funding comes from external sources, may feel more threatened by the proposals for regional missions, he said.

He added that there would be a lot of researchers throughout Africa who would want to be kept informed on these discussions. No attempts to consult with him or his colleagues had been made as far as he could see. *Continued on p4*

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See page 15

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# Don't rush

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) science secretariat recently launched a consultation on proposals to create an African Science and Innovation Facility. The ASIF was an idea mooted at the science ministerial in Senegal last year to mobilise technical and financial resources for the implementation of another ambitious initiative—Africa's science and technology Consolidated Plan of Action.

Activities envisaged for the ASIF include sustaining the consolidated plan's networks of excellence, encouraging creative individuals and institutions to generate and apply science and technology, and promoting entrepreneurship on the continent. It would mobilise expert scientific advice for the African Union and help with developing and implementing science policy. It may even commission research.

The fact that pan-African science initiatives like the ASIF are making progress attests to the goodwill—within Africa and abroad—to build science and innovation capacity on this continent. But there is always some danger involved in creating such institutions.

In Europe, the idea was born a number of years ago to set up a new agency to distribute grants to the *crème de la crème* of the continent's researchers. The plans for the European Research Council, which will issue its first calls for proposals in 2007, evolved in close discussion with Europe's scientists, and as a result may win their grudging support.

The same cannot be said for another large-scale European initiative that will see the light of day in 2009. The idea for a European Institute of Technology to compete with its Californian and Massachusetts counterparts followed that for an ERC. But with its strong backing from the bureaucrats in Brussels and little grounding in the science base, the EIT risks the derision of Europe's scientists.

No straight parallels should be drawn between either the EIT or the ERC and the proposed ASIF. However, the European experience illustrates that the thirst for quick policy fixes can sometimes outpace the rate at which the science community, which ultimately has to be on board in order to make a project a success, can mull over new proposals.

After long periods of neglect, things are now moving quickly in the African science policy arena. But if we need to do anything, it's to learn from the European lesson. We must make sure scientists have confidence in the policy processes that emerge. If not, their steady exodus from the continent will continue.

The recent ASIF consultation shows that there is a will in Nepad to sound out community views. But the time set aside for them to do so leaves something to be desired. "A report based on this consultation is expected by Nepad in September 2006 ... We would therefore much appreciate your responses by the deadline on the 31 August," reads the consultation document, which was published on 10 August.

One culprit is the January 2007 summit of African heads of state. Its focus on science and technology has sparked a rush to get policy proposals ready in time. But this rush must not result in compromised quality.

It's not just up to the policymakers. The research community, too, has a responsibility to keep abreast with policy development at this time of flux. The 2007 summit is a great opportunity. But unless policymakers, researchers and funders all work together over the next six months, its legacy won't be success.

## elsewhere

**"I was a little surprised at the implication that we needed the Gates Foundation to tell us to collaborate. [...] I don't think an Aids vaccine has been held up because we didn't know how to collaborate. The limiting factor is a scientific breakthrough, a bright idea and new thinking."**

*Robin Weiss, an Aids vaccine researcher at University College London in the UK, rejecting the idea that progress in his field has been hampered by a lack of collaboration. Nature, 10/8/06.*

*See Who got the funding? p19*

**"Government has shifted emphasis to science and technology education to achieve a critical mass of science and technology graduates and technicians."**

*Namirembe Bitamazire, the Ugandan education minister, on his government's decision to make science and technology studies compulsory from primary education right up to university level. New Vision, 28/7/06.*

**"Students from Angola and Mozambique already attend Fiocruz for Master's and PhD courses, but they seldom find work opportunities in their countries when they go back. Our aim is to help those countries to consolidate a local research infrastructure that could absorb those researchers."**

*Maria do Carmo Leal, vice-president of education, information and communication of the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation in Brazil, commenting on the country's plans to launch a project to boost public health research in Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa. SciDev.Net 7/8/06.*

**"We have been told to upgrade our containment to a higher level. Once we comply we will certainly go back and re-apply to be allowed to start the project."**

*Florence Wambugu, a Kenyan biotechnology researcher, after her application to build greenhouses for growing genetically modified sorghum in South Africa was declined by the country's government. The Nation, 16/7/06.*

**"Africa's food insecurity means developing agriculture is an important objective. Genetic modification technologies—with potential for pest resistance, drought and herbicide tolerance, as well as improved nutritional characteristics—must surely be part of the solution?"**

*Derek Hanekom, South Africa's deputy science minister, explaining his government's position on genetically modified crops after the recent GM sorghum fracas. Business Day, 2/8/2006.*

**"The continent must increase food production 12-fold in order to satisfy the needs of the population. To meet this challenge Africa must acquire and adapt biotechnology to the agricultural sectors."**

*President Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso. Quoted in The Herald, 7/8/06.*