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South Asia Biosafety Program

BANGLADESH

Network of Young Biotechnologists of Bangladesh Arranges the First Career Festival in Bangladesh for Youth in Biotechnology

Sumaiya Hafiz Riana and Mahmuda Kabir, Network of Young Biotechnologists of Bangladesh

Small plant analyzed in a laboratory © Florea Paul Daniel | Dreamstime.com

To illuminate the importance of biotechnology for national growth and shed light on career opportunities to students, the Network of Young Biotechnologists of Bangladesh (NYBB) recently arranged a two-day career fest: *NYBB's 1st Biotech Career Fest*.

The event brought together more than 65 invited speakers to discuss a wide range of subjects, ranging from opportunities and requirements in the corporate sector to pedagogy as a career path. Respected speakers answered questions from the enthusiastic and eager attendees regarding their chosen fields, such as pharmaceuticals, agriculture companies, government service, the medical sector, etc. Moreover, to encourage the youth to venture into promising yet unexplored career paths, biotechnologists involved with entrepreneurship or the medical sector were invited as well. Almost 300 promising current and future biotechnologists learnt about career opportunities through 12 sessions on diverse topics.

Dr. Md. Enamul Hoque said that the government is now prioritizing biotechnology and surely, this career fest has led to an extraordinary example in our country that has linked potential employees with recruiters.

The curtain was lifted with an opening session on February 26, 2021. Dr. Md. Sanowar Hossain, Chairman, Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission (BAEC), Prof. Md. Aftab Ali Shaikh, Chairman, Bangladesh Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (BCSIR), Dr. Md. Salimullah, Director General, National Institute of Biotechnology (NIB), Dr. Md. Asadulghani, General Secretary, Global Network of Bangladeshi Biotechnologists (GNOBB), and Dr. Md. Shahedur Rahman, President, Bangladesh Association of Biotechnology Graduates (BABG) were present in this session. The speakers discussed the prevailing lack of research facilities and job opportunities for biotechnology graduates and the possible means to overcome these. In his speech, Dr. Salimullah emphasized the need for inclusion of biotechnologists in appropriate sectors to boost national economic growth. Prof. Dr. Sabina Yeasmin, Chairperson, Department of Genetic Engineering & Biotechnology, University of Dhaka and Chair of the event highlighted current and future prospects in biotechnology in her speech.

The first day of the career fest was designed to introduce young biotech students to possible job opportunities in Bangladesh and abroad via sequential informative sessions where professionals from highly reputed companies gave insights from their personal journeys, the obstacles they faced, and how they overcome those. Insights from biotech graduates who are currently working in pharmaceutical, agriculture, private/government companies, educational institutions, and diagnostic centers helped attendees learn about job requirements and responsibilities. Scholars and pedagogues from acclaimed institutions explained the ins and outs of academia as well. The important outcome of these sessions was the creation of awareness among students about the existing pool of opportunities and how some chances are lacking, either due to the infrastructure or lack of required skill among the graduates. Through these sessions, participants learned about many unknown opportunities, as well as the necessity of becoming more eligible for the existing ones. The attending audience was absorbed in the clarifying sessions, as all speakers gave realistic yet helpful messages to future biotechnologists.

On February 27, four workshops took place with the theme of the career fest to enable students to obtain skills that are important in the job market. For the attendees, these workshops offered the opportunity to discuss matters directly with workshop facilitators and complete the knowledge they obtained on the first day of the event. Highly engaging sessions took place in the "Art of Networking" and "Mastering the Craft of Interview" workshops. In the former workshop, the trainer helped the attendees realize the vitality of networking in academic and professional life. In the latter, attending students were instructed about the

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ways to tackle the interviewing process and things to expect and avoid, with demo interview sessions.

Moreover, in the "Meet the Recruiters" session, attendees had the opportunity to meet a diverse panel of speakers from six different companies/organizations who are involved with the recruitment process. The session was highly engaging and eye opening as the moderator, Dr. Md. Shamsul Haque Prodhan, Chairman, Department of Department of Genetic Engineering & Biotechnology, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, guided the conversation to address the lack of diversity in the existing positions offered to biotech graduates and how they can be more eligible as candidates and meet the requirements of recruiters. Dr. Md. Amzad Hossain, Director General, Bangladesh Sugarcane Research Institute (BSRI), Prof. Dr. Aparna Islam, Biotechnology Program, Brac University, Nisbat Anwar, Head, HR, Renata Limited, SK Bashir Abdullah, Manager, Square Pharmaceuticals Ltd., Sheikh Md. Selim Al Din, Manager, Life Science Division, Invent Technologies Ltd., and Tamannyat Binte Eshaque, Genetic Counselor, NeuroGen Technologies Limited, were present and articulately pointed out the aspects of the current offered positions and the lack of diversity thereof. Furthermore, they brought attention to the increasing variation in pharmaceutical jobs for biotech graduates as the sector is shifting from conventional R&D to new horizons, such as biotech product development, management, and marketing and biosecurity and bio-waste management. Dr. Aparna Islam emphasized the importance of exploring fields like science communication and biosafety, where biotechnologists can have the greatest impact on biotech product acceptance and commercialization, especially genetically modified (GM) crops, which is very relevant to an agrarian country like Bangladesh. She pointed out that these jobs are equally important, as these activities ensure application and acceptance of biotech products like GM foods. The number of biotech graduates has been constantly growing over the past years, as more universities are including this in their program and the capacity to enroll students is increasing as well. Tamannyat Binte Eshaque pointed out another important sector for job opportunities: genetic counselors in medical sectors. She pointed out that though this position is limited, it is very relevant for biotechnologists. The recruiters suggested modification of the course curriculum to fit the needs of the recruiting organizations.

In the two-day-long event, a connective bridge among future professionals, current recruiters, and mentors was created that shall benefit all sides as biotechnology is receiving more exposure as an investment sector in the nation.

The closing ceremony was attended by Prof. Dr. AK Azad Chowdhury, Emeritus Professor and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Dhaka, as the Chief Guest. Invited special guests of the session were Prof. Dr. Nurul Absar, Chairman, Department of Biochemistry and Biotechnology, University of Science and Technology Chittagong (USTC), Quazi M. Emdadul Hoque, Executive Director, Lal teer Livestock Development Ltd., and Dr. Md. Enamul Hoque, Chief Scientific Officer & Head, Biotechnology Division, Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI). All the respected guests appreciated the initiative taken by NYBB and engaged both sides of any profession–the future employees and the current employers. Lastly, Dr. Md. Enamul Hoque said that the government is now prioritizing biotechnology and surely, this career fest has led to an extraordinary example in our country that has linked potential employees with recruiters. He also expressed his positive view about the event, saying that such programs should be arranged often. In the concluding speech, Dr. Mustak Ibn Ayub, Executive Director of NYBB, thanked the event organizing team for arranging such a time-appropriate event and requested the attendees to accompany NYBB in future endeavors as well.

ANNOUNCEMENT

National Biotechnology Development Strategy 2021-2025 by the Department of Biotechnology

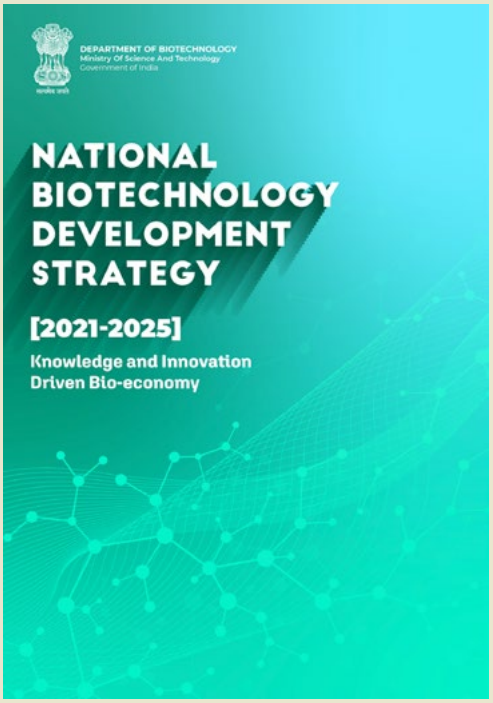
The National Biotechnology Development Strategy 2021-2025 was released at the Inaugural Ceremony of **#GlobalBioIndia2021,** in the presence of Finance Minister, Mrs. Nirmala Sitharaman and Minster of Health & Family Welfare and Science & Technology, Dr. Harsh Vardhan. The strategy is aimed at harnessing the potential of biotechnology as a premier precision tool for national development and well-being of the society. Under the mission, it aims to make India globally competitive in biotechnology research, innovation, translation, entrepreneurship, and industrial growth and be a USD 150 billion Bioeconomy by 2025.

The key strategies include building capacities, UNATI Biotech Missions, building a self-reliant India through biotech intervention, strategic partnerships, taking science to society, effective outreach and communication, global benchmarking and performance measurement, and policy enablers. An implementation plan has been provided for each of the above.

It is proposed to have a new mission programme on "Improved Crop Varieties through Gene Editing." Greater and focussed funding has been proposed towards new and emerging areas of biology, such as synthetic biology, gene editing, and therapy.

The instruments of implementation under the section on policy enablers include:

- Formulation of Biological Data Storage, Access, and Sharing Policy of India and setting up the Indian Biological Data Centre - PRIDE policy.
- Formulation of Regulatory Guidelines for Gene Editing.
- Indian Bio-safety Knowledge Portal (IBKP): For Ease of Doing Business.
- Harmonisation of regulatory guidelines, such as updating of Risk Group, formulation of stacked event guidelines, Environmental Risk Assessment (ERA) of Genetically Engineered Microorganisms, updating of recombinant DNA guidelines.
- Setting up a Policy Unit/Think Tank for forecasting and developing policy white paper on new and emerging areas and strategic priority areas.
- A well-structured National Biosafety and Biosecurity Network to be developed for epidemic /pandemic.



Download the National Biotechnology Development Strategy 2021- 25 at:

http://dbtindia.gov.in/about-us/strategy-nbds

INDIA

Webinar on Gene Editing in Agriculture: Key Initiatives in India

Dr. Vibha Ahuja, Biotech Consortium India Limited

Speakers for the Webinar on Gene Editing in Agriculture: Key Initiatives in India (February 17, 2021)

A webinar on *Gene Editing in Agriculture: Key Initiatives in India* was organized on February 17, 2021 by Tata Institute for Genetics and Society (TIGS), in partnership with Biotech Consortium India Limited (BCIL). The webinar was a continuation of discussions initiated in December 2020 at a previous webinar on *Gene Editing for Agriculture, Society, and Sustainable Development: Prospects and Perspectives* (featured in the January 2021 edition of the *SABP Newsletter*).

The webinar was chaired by Dr. T.R. Sharma, Deputy Director General (Crop Science), Indian Council of Agricultural Research and co-chaired by Dr. Kiran K. Sharma, Director, CGIAR Research Program on Grain Legumes and Dryland Cereals (CRP-GLDC), International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). The event featured talks by leading scientists in the country who are involved in addressing various productivity issues in some important crops and in improving nutritional quality in others by using genome editing technology. The webinar was attended by more than 600 participants representing a cross section of stakeholders, including scientists, regulators, industry, research students, etc.

Dr. Vibha Ahuja, Chief General Manager of Biotech Consortium India Limited (BCIL), the organizing partner of the webinar, welcomed the speakers and attendees and moderated the proceedings.

In his opening remarks, Dr. T.R. Sharma spoke about promising products being developed using gene editing in India. He also shared his optimism about the draft guidelines formulated by the Department of Biotechnology for regulating genome editing in plants. He opined that extensive support for research in gene editing and formulation of the guidelines clearly conveyed the Government of India's commitment in exploring new technologies for crop improvement. Dr. Kiran K. Sharma briefly spoke about how new technologies like CRISPR-Cas9 can allow for more precise, safe, and cost-effective genome editing to improve crop varieties.

The speaker presentations began with Dr. Siddharth Tiwari, Scientist-E, National Agri-Food Biotechnology Institute (NABI), talking about his team's work on gene editing in bananas for improving nutritional quality. He highlighted the scope of genome editing in clonally propagated crops, while providing a balanced view of the merits and certain demerits and possible solutions to overcome them in this type of approach. He also spoke about the importance of developing biofortified banana varieties that are rich in beta carotene and vitamin A.

Dr. Pooja-Bhatnagar Mathur, Principal Scientist & Theme Leader, ICRISAT, discussed gene editing in grain legumes and dryland cereals, with an emphasis on enabling technologies for trait development and targeted breeding, current and upcoming trait pipelines, as well as ensuring continuity and convergence between conventional and new methods of crop improvement.

Dr. Naveen Bisht, Staff Scientist IV, National Institute of Plant Genome Research (NIPGR), discussed gene editing in oilseeds for improving productivity, disease resistance, and oil quality of the *Brassica* family of oilseeds. He also commented on the promising results demonstrated by CRISPR-Cas9 genome editing for improving plants/crops across the world.

The webinar discussed the benefits of gene editing technology and how it could prove to be a gamechanger for sustainable agricultural practices.

Dr. Venkata Sresty Tavva, Group leader, Tata Institute for Genetics and Society (TIGS), brought gene editing in rice to the fore and discussed the research efforts being undertaken at TIGS to create rice varieties that are resistant to biotic and abiotic stresses. His talk also touched upon various methodologies that can be used to improve the rice crop, such as vector construction, tissue culture and transformation, and genetic engineering.

The webinar discussed the benefits of gene editing technology and how it could prove to be a gamechanger for sustainable agricultural practices. The panel concluded on a hopeful note with the convening scientists expressing their optimism in seeing regulatory harmonisation for enabling the research and deployment of gene edited crops in India.

VIDEO

A recording of the webinar can be accessed at:

https://tigs.res.in/2021/03/04/webinar-highlights-4/

Virtual International Conference on Current Scenario & Path Forward for GM Crops in India

Dr. Ratna Kumria, Director- Agricultural Biotech, Alliance for Agri Innovation

A virtual international conference was organized by the University of Agricultural Sciences (UAS), Bangalore, in association with the Federation of Seed Industry of India (FSII), Alliance for Agri Innovation on the topic "Current Scenario & Path forward for GM Crops in India." It saw discussions on how new technologies can address the problems of food insecurity and climate change while reducing expenses on crop inputs. The hurdles in allowing the commercial release of genetically modified (GM) crops were also discussed. More than 500 participants joined the conference, including scientists, researchers, biosafety regulators, government officials, students, academicians, and the general public. The speakers and audience, during the discussion, pointed out that scientific data-based scrutiny of GM technology is required, and there is a need for public awareness to clear speculations about the technology.

Dr. S. Rajendra Prasad, Vice Chancellor, UAS, the Chief Guest of the event, reminded the audience of how Bt cotton had benefitted India and the world tremendously, and there is no evidence of ill- effects of biotech crops on human or animal health. WHO, FAO, and OECD have also reiterated the biosafety of GM crops across the globe, with examples in several crops. India needs to emulate the success of Bt cotton in other critical crops like soyabean, groundnut, and mustard, where yields are stagnant now. He said that hybrid technology and GM crops were chosen by experts to bring the next green revolution.

The speakers and audiences, during the discussion, pointed out that scientific data-based scrutiny of the GM technology is required, and there is a need for public awareness to clear speculations about the technology.

Mr. Ram Kaundinya, Director General, FSII brought forward the deadlock in GM approvals in India, as there has not been a fresh approval to GM crops since 2005. In his opinion, the current regulatory stalemate is a result of the post-2010 moratorium on Bt brinjal, followed by the hold on GM mustard since 2017. Though questions have been raised about the safety, regulatory process, and seed sovereignty associated with GM cultivation, farmers have been positive, as is evident from their demand for Bt brinjal, HT cotton, and other technologies, which will be very critical for their success and competitiveness in the international market.

Dr. C. S. Prakash, Dean and Professor (Plant Genetics, Genomics, and Biotechnology), Tuskegee University, mentioned that humans have been modifying crops for thousands of years, ever since hunter-gatherers started cultivating and selecting plants to start agriculture. The wild ancestors of crops like maize, tomato, and many other crops have been selected and modified over several thousand years and transformed into the incredible high yielding crops that we see today. India's reluctance in approving Bt brinjal has benefited Bangladesh, as it approved, planted, and is reaping benefits of Bt brinjal. Instead, not only the Indian farmers lost a technological advantage, but this has also impacted scientific talent, research investments, and product pipelines in the country.

Dr. Vibha Ahuja, Chief General Manager, Biotech Consortium India Limited, said that there was a need for science-based risk assessment of GM crops since they have novel or modified characteristics. However, the focus of risk assessment should be on probabilistic risks and not speculative ones. There are internationally accepted guidance and methodologies, like the Codex 2003 Plant Guideline and the OECD's resources, which provide the necessary scientific (technical) foundation for a robust safety assessment. She further emphasized that risk assessment should not be driven by a risk communication agenda, and instead, requirements and procedures should be driven by real risks, not perceived risks, purely hypothetical what-ifs, or public misconceptions. She stressed the need for timely decision making, taking into account the results of risk assessment.

Dr. Wayne Parrott, Program Director, Institute of Plant Breeding, Genetics & Genomics, University of Georgia, spoke about gene editing technology and its potential in agriculture. Regarding the regulations associated with gene edited crops, he mentioned that the world was in a state of flux and most nations were in the process of defining and finetuning regulations, and different countries were using different trigger points to decide if something was to be regulated. In his opinion, both GM and genome editing technologies are necessary for agricultural improvement.

Expressing concerns over activism against GM technology, Dr. S. R. Rao, former advisor to the Department of Biotechnology, Government of India said that regulations that started in 1975 have been updated and developed in keeping with technology development. It was agreed that regulators and scientists should actively create awareness regarding the technology and press for a science-based evaluation and approval of GM crops.

Recommendations of the event are under preparation and will be submitted to the Government of India to demonstrate the exasperation of farmers and urgency of the scientist and industry in bringing these technologies. Adoption of these technologies in the right time is crucial to accrue the benefits.

Speakers at Current Scenario & Path Forward for GM Crops in India: (top, left to right) Director Agriculture, Karnataka; Dr. D. L. Savithramma, Dean (Agri), College of Agriculture, University of Agricultural Sciences; (bottom, left to right) Dr. Anitha Peter, College of Agriculture, University of Agricultural Sciences; Prof. Wayne Parrott, University of Georgia, Athens (February 3, 2021).

Speakers at Current Scenario & Path forward for GM Crops in India: (top, left to right) Mr. Ram Kaundinya, Director General, Federation of Seed Industry of India; Dr. Ramanjini Gowda, College of Agriculture, University of Agricultural Sciences; (bottom, left to right) Dr. Vibha Ahuja, Chief General Manager, Biotech Consortium India Limited; Dr. S.R. Rao, Former Adviser, Department of Biotechnology (DBT) (February 3, 2021).

Submit a Pre-Proposal to the Biosafety Research in Bangladesh Grants Program (BRBGP 2021)

Confined field trial of Golden Rice © Donald MacKenzie

In recent years, there has been significant progress in research on crop biotechnology and the biosafety regulatory system in Bangladesh. The country is also advancing towards the biosafety evaluation of genetically engineered (GE) crops and post-release monitoring. In view of these developments, the USAID-funded South Asia Biosafety Program (SABP) launched, in 2019, a competitive grants program—the **Biosafety Research in Bangladesh Grants Program (BRBGP)**—to improve science-based risk assessment knowledge. 2021 marks the third phase of the grants program under SABP.

The BRBGP will support **laboratory, field, or literature research** that will significantly advance the body of knowledge relevant to biosafety in Bangladesh priority areas. Research or activities included in (but not limited to) one of the following areas are eligible for funding:

1. **Providing baseline information related to current agricultural practice in Bangladesh to inform future assessments of the likely use of GE plants and their potential impact. This could include:**
   a. The management and use of pesticides or herbicides.
   b. Other agricultural management practices, including tillage, crop rotations, etc.
   c. Characterizing the impacts and interactions of current agricultural practices on surrounding ecosystems.
2. **Developing effective mechanisms to enhance risk management, including:**
   a. Understanding how farmers in Bangladesh obtain and use information about agricultural management practices, in order to inform future efforts to support effective stewardship of GE plants.
3. **Providing baseline information relevant to biodiversity in Bangladesh, including:**
   a. The presence and compatibility of wild populations of plants that are related to crop species in order to inform future assessments of the possibility and consequences of gene flow from GE plants.
   b. Characterization of arthropod abundance in and around agricultural fields to inform future assessment of the potential impacts of pest resistant GE plants on arthropod populations.
   c. Identifying important protected/charismatic species and characterizing their interactions with agricultural production.
4. **Providing information on the effectiveness of risk management provisions, particularly around confined field trials for GE crops, including:**
   a. Testing the use of spatial and reproductive isolation methods in the context of Bangladesh's agriculture.

Eligible Institutions and Collaborations

Public and private agricultural research institutions and universities of Bangladesh, or International Agricultural Research Centers (IARCs) involved in research in Bangladesh, may submit pre-proposals. The pre-proposal must include at least one collaborating scientist that resides and works in Bangladesh. **Collaboration between research and regulatory institutions is strongly encouraged.** Consortia comprised of research institutions in Bangladesh and those from developed countries or international institutions are also strongly encouraged. In such cases, complementarity and/or value addition in terms of experience, expertise, and/or facilities should be shown.

Grant Size

In 2021, a number of grants ranging between **US $15,000** and **US $25,000** are expected to be awarded to competent institutions to conduct research for one year.

Pre-Proposal Guidelines

The BRBGP Grant Announcement & Pre-Proposal Guidelines may be downloaded at:
foodsystems.org/sabp/#BRBGP

Pre-Proposal Submission Deadline

March 31, 2021, 17:00 hrs BST

Contacts for more information on the program & pre-proposal format:

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Source: foodsystems.org/sabp

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

EVENT	ORGANIZED BY	DATE	WEBSITE
INDIA			
Stakeholders Dialogue on Enabling Policies for Harnessing the Potential of Genome Editing in Crop Improvement	Trust for Advancement in Agricultural Sciences (TAAS), in collaboration with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS), Biotech Consortium of India Ltd. (BCIL), Tata Institute for Genetics and Society (TIGS), National Agri-Food Biotechnology Institute (NABI), and Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council (BIRAC)	March 17, 2021 Virtual (by invitation only)	http://www.taas.in
ICGEB-DBT Workshop: Re-Designing Smart Crops for Sustainable Agriculture - Dynamics of CRISPR-Cas Breeding, NGS, and Beyond	International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) and the Department of Biotechnology	April 26-30, 2021 Virtual	https://www.icgeb.org/re-designing-smart-crops-for-sustainable-agriculture-workshop-2021/
National Symposium on Plant Health Management Beyond 2020	Himalayan Phytopathological Society and the Department of Plant Pathology, Dr. YS Parmar University of Horticulture & Forestry	May 5-6, 2021 Nauni	http://www.yspuniversity.ac.in/mpp/hpsociety/NSHPS_Brochure.pdf
International Conference on Sugarcane Research	ICAR-Sugarcane Breeding Institute, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, and the Society for Sugarcane Research and Development	June 19-22, 2021 Coimbatore	https://tnau.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/1601938688.pdf
International Horticulture Conference – Next Generation Horticulture (NEXTGEN – HORT)	Tamil Nadu Agricultural University	September 16-19, 2021 Tamil Nadu	https://tnau.ac.in/
INTERNATIONAL			
7th Plant Genomics and Gene Editing Congress: Asia	Global Engage Ltd.	April 20-21, 2021 Virtual	http://www.global-engage.com/event/plant-genomics-asia/
Hands-on Course: CRISPR/Cas9 Genome Editing: A New Approach for Therapeutics	ICGEB	September 6-8, 2021 Cairo, Egypt	https://www.icgeb.org/activities/meeting-and-courses/
Workshop: Genome Editing to Generate Cellular and Animal Models of Human Diseases	ICGEB	September 7-10, 2021 Cape Town, South Africa	https://www.icgeb.org/activities/meeting-and-courses/

The South Asia Biosafety Program (SABP) is an international development program implemented in India and Bangladesh with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). SABP aims to work with national governmental agencies and other public sector partners to facilitate the implementation of transparent, efficient, and responsive regulatory frameworks for products of modern biotechnology that meet national goals as regards the safety of novel foods and feeds, and environmental protection.

SOUTH ASIA BIOSAFETY PROGRAM

Agriculture & Food Systems Institute

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