POSITION PAPER ON COEXISTENCE OF GENETICALLY MODIFIED AND CONVENTIONAL SEEDS

(Adopted by AFSTA General Assembly on 31st March 2006 in Entebbe, Uganda)

Agriculture is Africa's principle economic activity, and the use of agricultural inputs like improved seeds, pesticides and fertilizers continues to grow across the continent. The use of seeds improved by modern biotechnology (GM seeds) is poised to make inroads into African agriculture in the near future. In anticipation of this, there is a need to address co-existence of biotech and non-biotech crops, so that farmers are guaranteed the opportunity to grow the crops of their choice.

Coexistence is not new to agriculture. Seed producers for instance, have always had to deal with implementing practices that guarantee seed purity. Purity however, does not refer to the total absence of unwanted material. Though breeders strive for absolute purity, the reality of agricultural production is such that unavoidable low levels of impurities *will* occur. Breeders therefore adhere to certain thresholds, which specify standards of purity by setting the tolerance levels of impurity in certified seed.

The emergence of modern crop biotechnology has caused the development of a regulatory framework governing the use and transfer of this technology. Countries that grow biotech crops or permit their importation have laws that dictate the handling of these crops. These biosafety laws handle matters relating to human and environmental safety.
However, the issue behind coexistence is not related to safety but rather to economic aspects pertaining to the production and marketing of crops approved for use. Farmers are overwhelmingly driven by economic considerations. Besides struggling to lower their production costs, farmers also endeavour to respond to market demands for their products. Coexistence concerns *the economic consequences of adventitious presence of material from GM or organic seeds in conventional seeds.*

Since different systems of agriculture are practiced on adjoining fields, suitable farm-level measures during planting, cultivation, harvest, transportation and storage are applied in order to prevent the accidental mixing of transgenic and non-transgenic material. This commingling may result from wind or insect borne cross-pollination, volunteer plants or inadequate harvest practices.

Coexistence between these different cropping systems is possible through enforcing Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) such as observing seed separation distances, rotations, volunteer control, cleaning of machinery and communicating with neighbours. Suppliers of biotech seed also issue "Technology Use Guidelines" or "Crop Use Guidelines" to farmers; instructions on how to plant the crops in order to successfully meet market needs while keeping within the requirements for coexistence.

Recognising the need to address coexistence, AFSTA:

- Acknowledges the economic implications arising from the failure to implement coexistence mechanisms and urges the need to develop standardized measures that are non-discriminatory and science-based, including the implementation of GAP (Good Agricultural Practices), ensuring that growers continue to profit from farming as a business;
- Believes that experiences of farmers in other world regions who have for years been planting biotech crops alongside conventional and organic ones can inform the subject of coexistence;
- Believes that measures of coexistence should be efficient and cost-effective and should not be an unnecessary burden to farmers irrespective of their mode of production, seed producers, grain handlers and other stakeholders involved;
- Supports farmers' attempts to integrate different cropping systems and believes that national policies and regulations should support the coexistence and viability of conventional, organic and biotech systems in crop production;
- Believes that successful coexistence is a collective effort requiring cooperation, mutual respect and shared responsibility by farmers who practice different agricultural cropping systems as well as other stakeholders;
- Urges African Governments to develop an appropriate regulatory framework governing the handling of GM crops.

AFSTA recognises agricultural coexistence is not new and that it has been successfully practiced in the past. Today, real world experience has shown that coexistence between the different crop production systems is possible. AFSTA also believes that a lot can be learned from these experiences and therefore reiterates the need for practical solutions that guarantee farmers the freedom to choose the type of crops they grow.