

ECOWAS-Europe Thematic Policy Dialogue Workshop

THEME: DEVELOPING West AFRICA-EUROPE PARTNERSHIP IN NATURAL HEALTH PRODUCTS INNOVATION

Background

CAAST-Net is a network of national authorities sharing a common objective of advancing Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) cooperation in science and Technology (S&T) between Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa for common good. It is funded by the European Union's framework programme for research and technology development (FP7).

CAAST-Net operates in the context of the Joint Africa-EU Strategy, adopted at the 2007 Summit of Lisbon and reconfirmed by the 2010 Summit in Tripoli, which gives a political vision and roadmap for cooperation between the two continents, particularly, but not exclusively addressing partnerships between the priorities of Africa's S&T consolidated plan of action, and the European Union's priority thematic domains (such as energy, health, food and agric, environment, nanotech, transport, social sciences, etc). To enhance the cooperation in scientific and technological RDI between AU and EU member states and to foster STI policy dialogue, CAAST-Net carries out a series of experts' workshops between African Regional Economic Communities (REC) and EU parties, each one dedicated to a topic of mutual interest.

The overall objective of the workshops is to kick-off a process and to develop first recommendations for developing research-based collaboration addressing REC priority topics of mutual concern that will benefit from enhanced EU-EAC cooperation. The process allows raising mutual awareness of policies and programmes, and then exploring scenarios to expand and add value to ongoing cooperation, or raise new cooperation opportunities while optimising the interfaces between relevant EAC and EU policy domains.

The wider objective really is to examine the cooperation landscape in the chosen domain, consider its outputs and whether CAAST-Net can intervene through dialogue between the parties to enhance the cooperation process. Although research partnerships may be a spin off, the creation of research partnerships has not been our primary goal since that is the remit of technical projects, platforms and scientists – our role is intervention at the system or policy level. In practice, this higher-level objective is hard to translate into reality and our experience is that people do find it easier to talk about tangible research. However, it is important that we do not simply examine research priorities and reinvent the wheel in so doing. That is not our purpose. To be true to our goal we must examine the process of cooperation in the domain and seek interventions that enhance the cooperation process, not only identify research priorities and projects.

In that respect, a discussion was initiated with CAAST-Net partners from ECOWAS countries in order to start the process. Through their dialogue with ECOWAS these partners expressed “Natural health products innovation” as a theme of interest for a common workshop, topic also considered important within the European Union as it is linking Knowledge Based Bio-Economy (KBBE) and Health. The objective of this workshop is to organize under ECOWAS aegis a workshop allowing to dialogue on the selected topic in order to establish mutual understanding and to enhance cooperation.

West Africa-Europe partnerships in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) are important vehicles for focusing on the mutual socio-economic interests of the respective region in a particular domain. The theme of “Developing West Africa-Europe Partnership in Natural Health Products Innovation” explores the potential for research partnerships between the two regions on a topic which currently offer enormous potential for innovation.

Natural health products are broadly defined as the range of products derived from biodiversity resources with minimal artificial ingredients and used for optimal health benefits. These comprise herbal medicines, cosmetics, food products and other products promoted for use on the basis of the health benefit. The importance of these products has become pronounced given the growing emphasis on well-being of the individual and the sustainability of environment and ecological systems. The trend is for developing and promoting innovations for beneficial use of natural endowments socially and economically.

In the case of the ECOWAS sub-region, the exploitation of traditional herbal medicine is a major priority in the national health care delivery systems. The use of traditional medicine is an age-old practice which still contributes in important ways in addressing health care needs in the ECOWAS societies as it does in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. In the ECOWAS region, scientific institutions have been set up to develop traditional herbal medicine and modernize the production and dispensation of these medicines which still are at the core of health care delivery especially in the rural areas. There are also efforts being made to strategically exploit the traditional knowledge in herbal medicine as some countries (e.g. China and India) are currently doing. The ECOWAS countries such as Nigeria, Ghana and Senegal are similarly making efforts to do same and have established institutions to modernize and exploit traditional knowledge and the natural plant resources. These efforts reflect a key priority of the AU/NEPAD Africa’s Science and Technology Consolidated Plan of Action (CPA), which has five clusters of flagship programmes with one being the Biodiversity, Biotechnology and Indigenous Knowledge cluster.

Indeed, research and exploitation of natural health products is a major economic strategy of many countries including those in Europe with many enterprises developing to produce and market a diversity of products with distinctive health benefits. Apart from the medicinal products based on natural extracts, there are the cosmetics produced from plant sources such as shea, cocoa and aloe and these are known to have health benefits in their use. There are similar products in foods and beverages and their enterprises are thriving on the innovations that address interests in natural healthcare and well-being as well as sustainable use of biodiversity. The scientific community is active in this domain conducting research and spearheading the efforts in the innovations. In the broad sense, these activities in the natural health products (as defined) are in line with European innovation strategy. Natural health

Comment [ab1]: It would be important to also include other ECOWAS countries, even if not partners of CAAST-Net

products thrive on innovations which is central to both the West African and European efforts in this domain.

Workshop Goal and Objectives

This workshop is aimed at bringing stakeholders together to share information and experience in current developments in the domain of natural health products for mutual understanding and for potential collaborations in this field. The specific objectives include:

- Discussing current policy initiatives and frameworks in the regions for promoting research and innovation on natural health products;
- Sharing information and experiences in scientific research and innovation in the domain;
- Examination of the relationship between private and research sectors in order to address key opportunities and challenges on national and regional levels in ECOWAS and Europe
- Exploring potential and scenarios for enhancing Europe-ECOWAS private sector linkages in the natural health product research sector.

Outcomes of the meeting

- Improved mutual knowledge about research and innovation in the field of natural health and about potential links that could be implemented with private sector
- Identification of priority topics, niches for ECOWAS-EU partnership to develop natural health sector, including potential funding mechanisms
- Recommendations for cooperation in this field including potential activities

Structure of the workshop

- Opening remarks and setting the background
- Build common ground for discussion: inform about ECOWAS plan and initiatives as well as European initiatives relevant for the chosen topic
- Split-up into workgroups for building scenarios on how bi-regional cooperation in relation to ECOWAS natural health products objectives could add particular value inviting different stakeholders
- Bringing together and consolidating the results of the different working groups to build up joint scenarios

Participants

Four main categories of stakeholders from ECOWAS region and from Europe are targeted for participation in the Europe-ECOWAS Workshop:

- - The policy makers in the respective public institutions constitute a key stakeholder category. This is important also because ultimately there is the expected engagement of the decision makers in the respective countries and in the ECOWAS Secretariat for supportive policy initiatives.
- A second category of stakeholders are the private sector entrepreneurs who bring innovations to the marketplace.
- The third category of stakeholders important for this workshop is made up of the scientists and researchers working in the relevant scientific institutions in West Africa and Europe.
- NGO workers involved in the sustainability of biodiversity resources and the environment, producers communities and relevant STI networks.

Altogether, the expected participants will be about 40.

Dates and venue: The proposed dates are in the last week of (29 & 30?) October 2012.

Venue: The venue will be in Abuja, Nigeria.

Comment [ab2]: To be discussed and confirmed