



Fatma Omar receives a plaque from Dr. Bessy Kathambi, a lecturer at the University of Nairobi (left), and Dr Vitumbiko Chinoko. Photo Credit: AATF

OFAB celebrates scientists advancing agricultural biotechnology in Africa

By Verenardo Meeme

THE African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), through the Open Forum on Agricultural Biotechnology in Africa (OFAB) project, marked the 4th annual OFAB Day by celebrating African scientists whose groundbreaking innovations are driving the future of agricultural biotechnology. The event brought together policymakers, lawyers, researchers, students, and agricultural stakeholders to honour these leaders for their significant contribution to advancing science to tackle food and nutritional security challenges and combating misinformation about biotechnology.

Among those recognised was 27-year-old Fatma Mohamed Omar, a graduate of Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), who has been instrumental in advancing Kenya's agricultural sector through her research in biotechnology, molecular biology, and bioinformatics. Her work in microbial genomics has huge potential to help protect coconut

crops along Kenya's coast from harmful pathogens, improving the livelihoods of local farmers.

Beyond her research, Fatma has emerged as a prominent advocate for science communication, using media platforms to demystify agricultural biotechnology and showcase its potential benefits. Through interviews, articles, and public outreach, she has been a strong voice for educating the public and engaging young people in scientific innovations. Fatma's contributions have earned her multiple accolades among her peers, underlining her growing influence in the scientific community.

During the event, Kilifi County Deputy Governor Flora Mbetsa Chibule welcomed the celebration of African scientists like Fatma and stressed the importance of effective communication to ensure that technological advances in agriculture reach the intended beneficiaries. She called on the scientific community to actively engage the public and make complex innovations more accessible.

Dr Canisius Kanangire, Executive Director, AATF, reflected on OFAB's growth, noting its expansion to 16 African countries since its inception. He praised the forum's role in fostering informed discussions around agricultural biotechnology and dispelling misconceptions. Dr Kanangire also underscored the need for collaborative efforts to address Africa's food security challenges through biotechnology.

"Biotechnology provides a vital pathway to develop crops that are more resilient to climate change, pests, and diseases," he said. "By equipping farmers with these tools, we are not only increasing yields but also strengthening our food systems to withstand future challenges." Also recognised was Dr Oumar Traoré, a Burkinabé plant molecular virologist with over 30 years of experience. Dr Traoré has played a crucial role in shaping Burkina Faso's biosafety laws and overseeing significant biotechnology projects, including BT cotton and genome-edited rice. His



Patricia Nanteza talks with Johnson Mwai, far left, and farmer advocate Daniel Magondi in Mwai's Bt cotton field in Kenya. Photo Credit: Alliance for Science.

efforts have made him a key figure in West Africa's biotech landscape, helping to ensure that biotechnology is safely and effectively integrated into the region's agricultural systems.

Usman Abubakar, a farmer from Nigeria, was recognised for his adoption of BT cotton. Once struggling to make ends meet, Usman's use of genetically modified cotton significantly increased his yields, transforming not only his livelihood but also the agricultural practices within his community.

Ethiopia's Dr Diriba Geleti was honoured for his pivotal role in incorporating biotechnology into the country's agricultural policy. With nearly 30 years of experience, Dr Geleti made significant advancements in livestock production and biosafety regulations through his work at the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research. His efforts have strengthened Ethiopia's agricultural sector, ensuring more sustainable and productive farming practices.

Zanzibar's Dr Omar Dadi Shajak was celebrated for his contributions to developing biosafety regulations. His

work has provided a foundation for responsible biotechnology development on the island, including revising environmental laws to ensure a safe approach to biotech applications. His leadership has been crucial in promoting sustainable agricultural growth in Zanzibar.

Ghana's Dr Mumuni Abudulai has been a leader in pest management and genetically modified organism (GMO) research. His work on the pod borer-resistant cowpea has significantly improved food security in Ghana's savanna regions. Dr Abudulai's research has also had global impact through his active participation in international scientific forums, where he continues to push for advancements in sustainable agricultural practices.

Francoise Uwumukiza from Rwanda was recognised for her passionate advocacy for transforming food systems and promoting gender equality. As Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee in the East African Legislative Assembly, Ms

Uwumukiza has championed policies supporting biotechnology while also advocating for the economic empowerment of women in agriculture.

Malawi's Prof Wisdom Changadeya was honoured for his work in population genetics and biotechnology awareness. Through teaching, workshops, and publications, he has been instrumental in educating stakeholders on the importance of biosafety regulations and biotechnology's potential. His efforts have had a lasting impact on both academic and public understanding of the role of biotechnology in agriculture.

Prof Maria Zélia Lopes Menete from Mozambique was celebrated for her extensive contributions to climate-smart agriculture and food security. Through her leadership, Mozambique has seen advancements in biotechnology awareness and the development of climate-resilient crops. Her work has been vital in promoting sustainable agricultural practices across the country, ensuring a more secure food future for Mozambique.