

BIONNA - FOSTERING BIOINNOVATIONS IN THE AMERICAS

Societies of knowledge are becoming increasingly relevant worldwide and have special importance for our region. They have the capacity to generate, appropriate and utilize the knowledge required to meet the developmental needs of the countries and to construct their own future by converting the generation and transfer of knowledge into tools of society for its own benefit. In this context innovation is understood as the application of an idea for effective exploitation by the society and is the concrete result of an idea that fulfils its objective as it corresponds to two possible fields, scientific and technological on the one hand, and societal on the other. Thus, innovation involves synergy between academia, business, government and the civil society.

Many countries in our region are extremely diverse, and boast to possess 60% of the world's biodiversity and a rich ancestral knowledge on its use, which is vital for biotechnology. The latter implies the application of live organisms or their parts for the production of goods and services. On the other hand, biotechnology has been recognized as a priority area in the region for over a decade and clusters of trained human resources, as well as infrastructure, have been established in almost all the countries. Thus, the conditions are propitious to start to use this infrastructure, knowledge of biodiversity and biotechnology for the benefit of society and to contribute towards the sustainable development of all countries; all of this within the framework of concertation, which is still lacking at the hemispheric level. With this objective in mind and under the leadership of Michel Bergeron, while he was Director of Science and Technology at the Organization of American States (OAS), we visited Mexico and many countries in the Caribbean, Central and South America. We found a great potential in universities and a wide recognition by the ministries (Agriculture, Science and Technology, Economy) of the important role played by biotechnology in innovation, particularly in food safety and inocuity, sustainable utilization of biodiversity, and utilization of alternate energy sources without competing with food production.

As a result of these missions, the BIONNA (acronym for *Bioinnovations in the Americas*) Network was created

with the general goal of promoting and strengthening competitiveness and local innovation capacity in biotechnology in the Americas. Specifically, the network aims at fostering collaboration among private business, innovators, academic researchers, public and private sector leaders, cooperatives, indigenous groups and the civil society, so as to build alliances for stimulating innovation through exchange of experiences and information on food and agriculture, renewable energy and sustainable use of biodiversity.

BIONNA is based on a digital platform designed by the *Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja*, Ecuador, which allows the use of all available internet tools. It started its activities in mid 2010, thanks to the support of the Secretariat for Integral Development of the OAS. Currently, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama take part in the network. The strength of BIONNA lies in the participation of all actors in the development of a database of innovation in biotechnology in the region, and in being the vehicle for identifying the suitable persons for establishing strategic alliances to allow the transfer of knowledge into technology, products and services within a framework of equity, sustainable development and civil responsibility, utilizing local capacities.

The CELABIA center located in Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico, will make its pilot plants available to the network and will serve as a support for developing and scaling up process technology in the area of food and agriculture. Researchers, NGOs, private enterprises, cooperatives, accredited laboratories, intellectual property experts, universities, research centers, and science and technology organizations are encouraged to register in BIONNA (www.redbionna.org). Beginning in mid 2011, the BIONNA platform will be fully operational including, *inter alia*, search options, chats, database of experts, fora and virtual workshops.

The success of BIONNA will depend largely upon the active participation of all interested parties in the network. This will ensure that biotechnology will largely benefit our society.

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