

Agbiz participates in workshop on interface between science and policy

A joint workshop hosted by SANSOR and Croplife on the topic of bridging the gap between science and policy took place at the Future Africa venue in Pretoria on 23 January. The workshop aimed to examine how science could better inform certain policy decisions and what the potential role of scientists could be in policymaking in the agricultural space. Agbiz also presented at the workshop. With increasing globalisation, the impact of climate change and food security challenges, there is a great opportunity for science to inform, contribute to and support decision-making, also in South Africa.

There seems to be quite a philosophical debate as to whether scientists should get involved in policymaking at all, and if so, how and to what extent. In broad terms, there are two possible reasons for scientists to engage in the policy process. The goals are either to improve policies that affect science or to improve policies that can benefit from scientific understanding. Scientists can attempt to achieve their goals by either providing information or by championing particular policy outcomes. Evidence-based policymaking is something that should be pursued by policymakers. Scientists should produce evidence, which policymakers then use for decisions. In practice, this may prove to be quite a challenge. Scientists are essentially accountable to editors of peer-reviewed journals and grant funders. They may be interested in policy but, are not required to focus on issues that have policy relevance. On the other hand, policymakers are usually accountable to political parties and voters. Scientists tend to think and plan long term, whilst policymakers often focus on the short term.

Internationally, formalised mechanisms aimed at bridging the gulf between science and policy exist. These fora are called science-policy interfaces. Many operate in the arena of global environmental governance. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is an example of an effective forum of this nature.

In the legislative process in South Africa there are many opportunities for interested parties to comment on laws in the making. Ideally, scientists, academics and other experts should be more involved in these processes to ensure that policy and law has a sound factual and scientific basis. Policy processes, also in the agricultural field, could only benefit from the input and participation of experts like these.

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