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Media Release

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South African biotechnology perceptions survey shows improved awareness

The Minister of Science and Technology, Ms Naledi Pandor, will launch the results of the Public Perceptions of Biotechnology survey in South Africa tomorrow (1st of November 2016) at the Government Communication and Information Systems, Press Room Tshedimosetso in Pretoria.

The study was conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council, commissioned by the Department of Science and Technology's Public Understanding of Biotechnology programme, housed at the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement.

The South African Public's Perceptions of Biotechnology survey focused on perceptions around biotechnology broadly as well as on more specific areas such as agricultural biotechnology, medical biotechnology and indigenous biotechnology knowledge. The analysis will provide key information that may be used to inform policy and debate in the South African biotechnology sector.

The study was administered through the South African Social Attitudes Survey in November 2015. Interviews were conducted at 500 sites in all provinces in South Africa, in both urban and rural areas. Two thousand nine hundred forty (2940) adult South Africans were interviewed and the results provide representative data for the South African adult population.

The study looked at changes over time in instances where there is comparability to the previous national survey of Public Perceptions of Biotechnology of 2004. These changes signify a significant shift in public awareness of aspects of biotechnology between 2004 and 2015.

The results of this study provide indications of what the public know about biotechnology, how the public feel about a range of biotechnology-related issues, how the public access information about biotechnology, and the manner in which the public perceive biotechnology-related products.

According to the study since 2004 public familiarity with the term 'biotechnology' has more than doubled, from 21% in 2004 to 53% in 2015. Awareness that genetically modified (GM) foods form a part of the South African diet has more than tripled from 13% to 48%.

The study also reveals that there has been a major increase in attitudes that favour the purchasing of GM food. The proportion of the public that would purchase GM food on the basis of health considerations has increased from 59% to 77%, while attitudes to purchases on the basis of cost considerations and environmental considerations have increased from 51% to 73% and 50% to 68%, respectively.

When it comes to knowledge about biotechnology, the study reveals that most South Africans (73%) report having little or no knowledge about biotechnology. A younger and more privileged group report considerably greater knowledge than older and less privileged groups. Almost half of the public feel that biotechnology is too specialised for them to understand.

The study further reveals that South Africans have used biotechnology in the context of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) and practices. Groups with low incomes and low levels of education may find it difficult to engage with concepts of mainstream biotechnology, but harbour rich traditions of knowledge and practice of IKS that may be successfully leveraged to build greater awareness of biotechnology.

When it comes to the perceptions of medical biotechnology the overall knowledge about medical applications of biotechnology is similar to that of GM foods, suggesting that attitudes among the public cut across specific applications of biotechnology.

The risks and benefits of biotechnology are central to public debates and meaningful engagement in these debates requires knowledge about biotechnology concepts and applications.

Only about half of the South African public engaged with the question of a general risk/benefits analysis of biotechnology, while the other half registered indifference or 'don't know' response.

White and Indian South Africans were more likely to see biotechnology as an overall risk to society compared to Black African and Coloured groups. Higher levels of education and living standard are associated with an increased likelihood to view biotechnology as a risk. Increased educational attainment was associated with a more positive risk/benefit assessment.

Those living on rural farms and urban informal areas were substantially more positive in their assessment than those in other areas. An individual with no ethical or religious objections to GM is much more likely to believe that biotechnology is a benefit rather than a risk. If an individual thinks that government effectively regulates GM food, then he or she will be less likely to view biotechnology with uncertainty and more likely to rate it as a benefit than a risk.

South Africa is a highly stratified society, characterised by divisions along lines of economic inequality, educational inequality, ethnicity, race and geographical locations. The perceptions

of the South African public can be delineated by key demographic indicators such as age, education, income and geographical location.

The report recommended that policy interventions need to include a strategic approach towards addressing these different publics in different ways, drawing on the evidence related to their levels of knowledge, attitudes, and preferred sources of information. The policy needs to assess which 'publics' require engagement in terms of specific issues as identified in the key themes emerging from the survey.

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About SAASTA:

South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SAASTA) is a business unit of the National Research Foundation. The role of SAASTA is to coordinate science engagement programmes, activities and strategy through science awareness, communication and education.

About the NRF

The National Research Foundation (NRF) was established on 1 April 1999 as an independent statutory body in accordance with the National Research Foundation Act. The NRF is a key public entity responsible for supporting the development of human resources for research and innovation in all fields of science and technology. The organisation is one of the major players in educating and training a new generation of scientists able to deal with South African and African needs. The organisation encourages public awareness and appreciation of science, engineering and technology, and facilitates dialogue between science and society. Its vision is to contribute to a prosperous South Africa based on a knowledge economy. For more information on the operations and programs within the NRF please visit www.nrf.ac.za