

Connected Network in the battle to control plant disease in sub-Saharan Africa

Scientists from 11 African countries and delegates from the UK and elsewhere recently joined in Bristol for the inaugural launch conference of Connected - a ground-breaking project which aims to build a sustainable network of international scientists and researchers to tackle vector-borne plant disease that devastates crops in sub-Saharan Africa.



The network is led by Professor Gary Foster from the University of Bristol's School of Biological Sciences jointly with Professor Neil Boonham from Newcastle University and Fera Science Ltd. The network is funded by a £2m grant from the UK government's Global Challenges Research Fund, which supports research on global issues that affect developing countries.

The launch conference

The Connected Network Launch conference began with a meeting of the project's management board, led by the UK's Chief Plant Health Officer, Professor Nicola Spence. Scene-setting presentations were made by Foster, Spence and Boonham. Question and answer sessions focused on the pump-prime research funding opportunities the project will be enabling in the coming months.

The second day was led by input from African delegates, with presentations from four of the project management board's African-based researchers including:

- Prof Lava Kumar, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Nigeria
Integrated approaches for severing the virus-vector connection in Sub-Saharan Africa
- Dr Anne Wangai, Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organisation (KALRO), Kenya
Management of maize lethal necrosis disease outbreak through multi-institutional co-operation
- Dr Titus Alicai, National Crops Resources Research Institute, Uganda
CONNECTED: an opportunity for sustainable management of plant virus diseases in Africa

- Prof Emmanuel Okogbenin, African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF), Kenya
Safeguarding Africa's food security against crop viral diseases

A series of workshops followed for the remainder of the conference, led by the University of Bristol's Cabot Institute, which is providing input and expertise to the Connected project. The workshops gathered thoughts and ideas from delegates, helping to shape the next steps in the project, setting priorities for pump-prime funding and guiding future network action planning.

Foster said: "This hugely successful event brought world-leading researchers and plant virologists together in a conference that was bustling with expertise, experience, energy and enthusiasm for the challenges ahead.

"The Management Board and network team are now reflecting on the many thoughts and ideas that flowed from delegates, incorporating them into our action plan. An important part of this involves setting out details of pump-prime funding opportunities that will be made available in the coming weeks. The best way for interested people to ensure they receive updates is to join [the network](#)."

"The outputs from the UK Launch Conference will be reviewed and supplemented by our forthcoming Launch Conference in Africa in Spring 2018.

African delegates from Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Ghana, South Africa, Mali, Egypt, Rwanda and Cote d'Ivoire were joined by researchers from the UK, USA, India, Taiwan and Denmark. As the project progresses, Connected will run further meetings, training courses, seminars and networking events in both the UK and Africa with the aim of promoting interdisciplinary working and strengthening research capacity and capability.

Funding for research activities

Connected will provide pump-prime funding for a range of innovative and potentially-transformative research activities, whose impact will be thoroughly evaluated. These research activities focus on five key areas:

- Control strategies
- Vector biology
- New diseases
- Vector/virus interactions
- Diagnostics/surveillance/forecasting

The research projects with the greatest regional impact will then be grown into larger scale activities to achieve still greater bearing on the battle to control plant disease in sub-Saharan Africa. Connected will also provide training and capacity-building opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Anyone with an interest in African plant virus vector-borne disease can [apply to become a network member](#).