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## Africa conference confirms growing strength of plant disease research network



## A group photo of the participants

A plant science conference in Uganda which drew together dozens of world-class researchers from across Sub-Saharan Africa and the UK this month has confirmed the growing strength of a network whose collaborations promise to deliver solutions to devastating crop diseases in the years ahead.

Delegates from 10 African countries joined counterparts from the UK at the CONNECTED Virus Network Africa Launch Conference, which took place in Kampala, Uganda, from 7-9 May. It was immediately followed by a two-day training workshop aimed at early career researchers looking to develop skills including research grant proposal writing.

Professor Neil Boonham from Newcastle University, UK, and Co-Director of the CONNECTED project, says the outcomes of the conference confirm

the value and potential of the project, and is urging more people to come forward to join the growing network.

"Our Africa Launch Conference was a superb event, with a tangible buzz of excitement amongst delegates for the whole week," he said.

"The CONNECTED project is as yet just a few months old, but we are already seeing promising collaborations between highly-skilled and enthusiastic researchers to find solutions to plant disease in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr Titus Alicai, Leader of the Root Crops Research Programme at NARO, during the delegates' visit to The National Crops Resources Research Institute

"The project's focus on encouraging early career researchers is already paying dividends, and it's clear that one of the legacies of CONNECTED will be a cohort of scientists who have begun to form collaborations, injecting real

energy to develop solutions to tackling devastating vector-borne plant disease in the years ahead.

"We are now looking to recruit still more scientists and researchers who share our passion to tackle food insecurity, and we are inviting anyone with an interest to join us.

"Importantly, we are not simply looking to recruit those working on issues directly related to plant disease, but also scientists and researchers working in other disciplines. For example we need social scientists, economists, geographers and others as we work hard to make this a truly interdisciplinary project."

The conference was hosted by Dr Titus Alicai, Leader of the Root Crops Research Programme at The National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO),

Uganda, and was officially opened by Yona Baguma, Deputy Director General of NARO.

Delegates heard a number of research-focused presentations on issues including pest management, plant protection, and agricultural extension in Africa. There was a series of workshops during which delegates considered the project's future priorities for the pump-prime research funding which forms an integral part of the opportunities offered by CONNECTED, as well as identifying training needs and opportunities for future interdisciplinary work.

Day Two of the conference was hosted at The National Crops Resources Research Institute, and delegates enjoyed a tour of the laboratory facilities as well as some of the fields which are hosting much of the Institute's work on crops including cassava, sweet potato and maize.

The CONNECTED network is funded by a £2 million grant from the UK government's Global Challenges Research Fund, which supports research on global issues that affect developing countries. It is led by Professor Gary Foster from the University of Bristol's School of Biological Sciences jointly with Professor Neil Boonham from Newcastle University. This story was also published at <http://bit.ly/2GstY98>