

Thursday 10th August 2023

Discussions on international cooperation and assistance measures

Discussion of the first topic allocated to the Second Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) – (a) international cooperation and assistance under Article X – was completed on Wednesday. There were no collective conclusions drawn at this stage. Indeed, it seems most delegates would agree it is too early to reach conclusions as there is more work needed to reach a collective understanding of key aspects of what is desirable. Thursday is allocated for discussion of the related topic of a possible mechanism to enhance implementation of international cooperation and assistance (ICA).

At the end of Wednesday, the Chair of the Working Group, Ambassador Flávio Damico (Brazil), circulated a draft of elements of what will become the procedural report of this session. He asked delegates for feedback on its contents and format to save time later in preparation of the report.

Documents, statements and presentations are being posted to the official webpage for the Second Session at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/67451>. Official BWC documents are also available via <https://documents.un.org>.

Panel discussions

There were three panels held during Tuesday and Wednesday. These were: Adrien Sivignon and Elodie Liobard (Interpol), Alessandro Marcello, International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), Peter McGrath, The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS), and Federica Irene Falomi, UN Technology Bank [Tuesday morning]; Madison Wimmers, World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly the OIE), Joe Simmonds-Issler, Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), Irina Albrecht, 1540 Committee, and Sergey Zinoviev, Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) [Wednesday morning]; and Dumisani Dladla, Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) secretariat, Dimo Calovski, UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and Tak Mashiko, Conventional Arms Branch, UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) [Wednesday afternoon]. The major element of each of the panels was management and financing of ICA activities.

Substantive issues and key questions

[*Note: this reporting includes substantive points from the first three days of the WG. Issues specific to the proposed mechanism will be covered in the next report.*]

There is greater common ground than there was in past years for many of the issues related to ICA, building on the broad agreement on the possible ways forward in this issue area during the Ninth Review Conference (2022). There was considerable convergence of perspectives expressed in descriptions of some of the challenges of dealing with infectious disease in circumstances where available resources and know-how are limited. There were many references to COVID-19 pandemic experiences. At the same time, there remain significant divergences of views relating to the extent of the role of the BWC in ICA, especially around the desirability of a dispute resolution element. These divergent positions have been strongly held for a long period on each side of the debate.

One of the key questions is where the BWC might find its niche amongst other related bodies. A number of interventions considered how BWC ICA activities could fit into the existing panoply of related programmes of other global and regional bodies, not to mention bilateral programmes. There were many concerns raised about overlap with other bodies, primarily to avoid duplication of activities and inefficiencies in use of precious resources. There was also a question of whether other entities have crept into areas that might have been expected to be filled by the BWC but which had remained vacant by the BWC because of its lack of an institution. As the Chair noted, nature abhors a vacuum.

There was broad support for some form of new fund. Perceived advantages and disadvantages of different financing models were expressed. Having funding from the regular budget of an agency can provide consistency, predictability and sustainability. A fear with any voluntary fund is that it is established but attracts minimal donations. [Note: funding from an entity's regular budget brings with it difficult budget decisions through international policy processes and the history of the BWC is littered with late-night meetings having difficulty in reaching consensus on budgets. While voluntary funding alleviates pressure on multilateral policy processes, this has the disadvantage that each donor has to decide on how much to offer. Moreover, negotiations between foreign ministries and finance ministries within individual governments about voluntary funds can be more difficult than getting agreement for payment of an assessed contribution.]

Appropriateness and sustainability of assistance was raised. One example cited was the mismatch of building diagnostic laboratories in low-resource settings that had been designed to operate in higher-income countries. This has prompted initiation of a 'Grand Challenge for sustainable diagnostic laboratories'.

Measures other than the proposed mechanism

The remit for topic (a) is about measures, which includes the proposed mechanism to be discussed on Thursday. While the mechanism has been the focus of many interventions, there are measures beyond the mechanism. Some delegations see a mechanism in the context of an 'action plan' which might include other commitments. There was encouragement for more participation in submission of reports on Article X activities, including from recipient countries, in order to share experiences. Potential benefits of further development of guidelines or templates for such reporting were noted. Support was expressed for improvement to the existing Article X database. A number of delegations highlighted the use of other resources such as the proposed SecBio platform.

Some untackled questions

There was a clear sense from many interventions in the plenary and many conversations with delegates in the corridors that what is happening with ICA is not considered effective enough. But how should effectiveness be defined in this context and who evaluates it? While this may seem like a conceptual discussion, it might be useful to frame understanding – even if boils down to the simple question of what would a 'successful' implementation of Article X look like. The tone of the discussion illustrates that simply doing more of what is being done now under the BWC would not be considered enough. Following this argument to its logical conclusion, there has to be some difference in character for future activities, and so this question is key – what would those changed characteristics be? Another aspect that was not discussed represents a significant challenge. Those panellists that provided information about their major sources of funds showed very similar lists of donors. There is a very real prospect that enhanced ICA activities under the BWC may simply result in the same funding achieving the same outcomes that it would have done before, but being channelled through this new route. Consideration of ways of increasing available funds in this area may be productive.

These reports have been produced for all BWC meetings with NGO registration since the Sixth Review Conference (2006). They are available from <https://www.bwpp.org/reports.html> and <https://www.cbw-events.org.uk/bwc-rep.html>. A subscription link is available on each page. Financial support for reporting from the WG Second Session has been gratefully received from Global Affairs Canada. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <richard@cbw-events.org.uk>.