

Monday 11th August 2025

## International cooperation and assistance at WG6: setting the scene

The topic scheduled for the first two days of the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC), is ‘Measures on cooperation and assistance under Article X’. This is topic (a) of those allocated to the WG by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). While the agenda item for this Session is the broader international cooperation and assistance (ICA) topic, it is likely that the possibilities for an ICA mechanism will be the focus of many discussions. Key to getting consensus at the Ninth Review Conference was agreement on enhancing the implementation of Article X through the establishment of some form of mechanism. To this end, paragraph 18 of the Final Document reads: ‘The Conference decides to develop with a view to establishing a mechanism open to all States Parties to facilitate and support the full implementation of international cooperation and assistance under Article X. In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.’

### **Article X issues in context**

Article X embodies a key bargain within the BWC that the renunciation of biological weapons and the implementation of controls over hostile uses of the life sciences have to be balanced so not to hinder the use of the life sciences for peaceful purposes. In addition, Article X provides that states parties ‘undertake to facilitate, and have the right to participate in, the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials and scientific and technological information for the use of bacteriological (biological) agents and toxins for peaceful purposes’. The concept of ‘cooperation and assistance’ goes further than Article X itself, including aspects such as capacity building. The importance of ICA issues for many countries is reflected by the inclusion of these issues in some form in each of the BWC inter-sessional work programmes since the first was established at the resumed Fifth Review Conference in 2002.

Developments in the life sciences underpin many positive aspects of modern societies. New medical treatments have a substantial human impact and the use of biological technologies and techniques in manufacturing processes support a number of economically significant activities. In recent years, disease outbreaks such as SARS, Ebola Virus Disease and the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated the vulnerability of modern societies to the impacts of infectious disease. It has been clearly demonstrated that no country is safe from a highly transmissible disease unless there are capabilities to deal with that disease across the globe. As biological weapons are essentially tools for the deliberate spread of disease, it follows that enhanced capacities to deal with naturally occurring diseases reduce the potential for harm from deliberate disease.

There are long-standing distinct divergences of perspectives between states parties on ICA issues. Many of these derive from security, economic and geographical considerations which influence how individual countries see the balance between the two sides of the bargain embodied in Article X. Where the divergence remains strongest is on the scope of Article X and on the question of how to improve implementation of it. Some delegations have expressed the view in past BWC meetings that Article X is incompatible

with the imposition of economic sanctions (often referred to as ‘unilateral coercive measures’) and that denials of export licences for materials and technologies for peaceful purposes are contrary to Article X. Other delegations have taken an opposite view and have highlighted the challenges of controlling materials and technologies that have peaceful uses as well as having potential to contribute to a biological weapons programme.

This tension is reflected in the WG mandate which notes that any measures it proposes ‘should be formulated and designed in a manner that their implementation supports international cooperation, scientific research and economic and technological development, avoiding any negative impacts.’

As with other BWC measures, Article X does not stand alone. As well as the interactions with security elements of the Convention, there are widely-acknowledged synergies with assistance, response and preparedness activities under Article VII.

An earlier initiative to enhance implementation of Article X was the creation of ‘a database system to facilitate requests for and offers of exchange of assistance and cooperation among States Parties’, often referred to as the ‘Article X database’, by the Seventh Review Conference (2011). A number of delegations have suggested that the database is underused. The Ninth Review Conference (2022) added an ISU staff post which includes some ICA activities.

### **Discussions in the Working Group**

The ICA topic, or the ICA mechanism, has been discussed as an agenda item during the Second (August 2023), Fourth (August 2024) and Fifth (December 2024) WG Sessions. Relevant WG2 working papers include: WP.1 (ASEAN member states), WP.2 (UK), WP.3 [plus Rev.1] (USA and others), WP.5 (Japan), WP.6 (Canada and Philippines), WP.7 (Japan and others), WP.11 (Iran), WP.12 (Iran), WP.13 (Pakistan), WP.14 (China), WP.18 (Russia), WP.21 (Iran) and WP.22 (Georgia, Malawi, Norway and Philippines). The only relevant WG4 paper is: WP.7 (UK). Relevant WG5 papers include: WP.2 (Norway), WP.10 (Russia) and WP.14 (EU).

There have also been a number of informal consultations and an active effort by the Friends of the Chair (FoCs) for this topic – Christian Hope Reyes (Philippines) and Thomas Fetz/Trevor Smith (Canada). The FoCs circulated a non-paper just before the Fifth Session on a possible decision for an ICA mechanism. Much of what was within that was included in a proposal from the Chair for a draft decision by a Special Conference on the two mechanisms that was issued as [CRP.1](#) of WG5 on 8 December 2024. This proposal was brought to a halt on the penultimate evening of WG5 by one delegation; many other delegations have expressed support for continuation.

There is a clear desire to include ICA measures as part of the overall strengthening of the Convention. While the atmosphere towards an ICA mechanism is positive, some differences on possible details remain. Many of the divergences come down to perspectives on what success for the mechanism would mean. For example, from potential donor countries there is a desire to see effective use of funds on practical projects. From potential recipient countries there is a desire to make funding of capacity building projects easier. While these might not seem to be contradictory, one practice from other development areas is the use of a ‘cost-share contribution’ from the recipient states parties to promote sustainability and ownership of projects. This has raised concerns that some potential recipients might find this challenging. One of the yardsticks for success or failure of any potential ICA mechanism the current author has in mind is whether it attracts additional funding from donor countries.

The Rolling Text circulated by the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), includes some suggested ICA measures including the establishment of an ‘International Biosecurity Education Network’ [this is distinct from an existing NGO activity with a very similar name], a ‘Laboratory Network’ to facilitate partnerships and training, and a ‘capacity-building fellowship programme’.

*These reports have been produced by the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP) 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 webpage. The reports are written by Richard Guthrie, CBW Events, who is solely responsible for their contents <[richard@cbw-events.org.uk](mailto:richard@cbw-events.org.uk)>.*