BioWeapons Prevention Project

report 2025-3

Tuesday 12th August 2025

Opening of WG6 and setting the scene for discussion of S&T developments

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was opened on Monday morning with Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil) in the Chair. The plenary was to be held in Room XIX but had been moved to Room XX owing to the need for additional facilities for negotiations on the plastics treaty.

Participants were welcomed by a short video message from Helen Clark, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and former head of the UN Development Programme. She is currently a member of The Elders and an author of that group's recent policy paper on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. She called for applying insights from the COVID-19 experience and the 'fragmented approach to biosafety, biosecurity and pandemic risk' to the task of supporting a 'stronger, better-resourced' BWC which she noted lacked 'an independent verification mechanism, sustainable funding and dedicated technical capacity'. Calling for governments to 'move beyond rhetorical support', she concluded: 'Future generations will not judge us on the threats we faced. They will judge us on how we responded to them.'

As discussions on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) issues which started on Monday will continue into Tuesday, these will be reported on Wednesday.

Setting the scene for discussions on S&T developments

The topic scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday of the first week of WG6 is 'Measures on scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention'. This is topic (b) of those allocated by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). The Conference considered proposals for review of scientific and technological (S&T) developments in some detail, while facing considerable political challenges. In the final week, as successive iterations of the proposed text on S&T review were being produced in attempts to achieve consensus, more and more details were being removed. The Final Document was therefore sparse on this issue area and paragraph 19 reads: 'The Conference decides to develop with a view to establishing a mechanism to review and assess scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention and to provide States Parties with relevant advice. In order for this mechanism to be established, the Working Group on the strengthening of the Convention will make appropriate recommendations.'

The life sciences have been undergoing rapid developments over recent decades at a pace that has accelerated in recent years. As new discoveries are made, the context the BWC has to operate within changes constantly. Without an understanding of the S&T context, it is impossible to maintain controls over the use of disease as a weapon at either the national or international level. Some of these challenges are amplified as the uses of biological technologies and techniques spread far more widely. There are many of these that may be used and so it is often inadvertently misleading these days to think of a 'biotechnology industry' rather than a range of industries that use biological methods. This adoption of biological techniques has led to more widespread availability and knowledge of materials and processes that may have potential for both peaceful and hostile purposes. Real-world experience has shown that S&T developments proceed at a

faster rate than the developments in policy structures intended to monitor them and, if new risks or benefits are identified, to manage them.

BWC Article XII, which deals with the role of Review Conferences, mandates 'Such review shall take into account any new scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention.' There has been a recognition amongst a large number of states parties that the five-yearly process of briefly reviewing S&T developments during Review Conferences has not been enough – that S&T developments have been moving faster than the policy responses to them. A key challenge is that identifying relevant S&T developments is not enough on its own – once developments are identified, what are their implications? This need to identify implications can perhaps best be illustrated by the contemporary discussions about artificial intelligence. It is clear this particular field has been the subject of significant advances in recent years and while some implications are readily apparent, it is clear that there are likely to be more that will emerge. The same is true for many developments that are specifically in the life sciences. One example, much cited, is the CRISPR/Cas9 gene tool (often simply referred to as CRISPR) that allows for exact and accurate editing of genetic sequences. What are the implications for regulation to prevent its hostile use? Even in the relatively short time that this technique has been in more than simply experimental use, perceptions of these have changed.

Discussions in the WG

The S&T topic, or the associated proposed mechanism, were discussed during the Second (August 2023), Fourth (August 2024) and Fifth (December 2024) WG Sessions. Many relevant working papers were submitted to WG2 with the three referred to most often in plenary being WP.4 (US), WP.8 (UK) and WP.12 (Iran); and of those focused on a possible mechanism, the three referred to most often in plenary were WP.9 (UK), WP.16 (Russia) and WP.19 (Iran). One relevant paper was submitted to WG4: WP.6 (UK); as was the case in WG5: WP.17 (EU).

While most aspects of strengthening the BWC have synergies with other areas, the better understanding of S&T developments impacts across a broad swath of BWC activities which have been highlighted, including: verification, international cooperation and assistance, preparedness and response, and national implementation.

When BWC states parties first looked in detail at how the review of S&T developments could be enhanced, most contributions to discussions looked at one or other of two models – a panel, committee or board selected by some criteria to have a limited membership or a structure open to experts from all states parties willing to participate. Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages. More recently, many proposals have taken a hybrid approach that includes an open arrangement with some activities delegated to smaller panels. In recent discussions, most delegates that expressed a preference were happy with a hybrid model as from most perspectives it contains the elements they want even if it includes elements they were not so keen on having included. The number of explicit preferences indicated for either a limited-membership committee/board or of a body open to all states parties have significantly reduced over time. Underpinning most comments on reviews was a sentiment that any S&T process should be led by science and not by politics.

There have also been a number of informal consultations and an active effort by the Friends of the Chair (FoCs) for this topic – Grisselle Rodríguez (Panama), Peter Babigumira Ahabwe (Uganda) and Kiseok Michael Kang (Republic of Korea). There were various iterations of FoC papers on this topic, much of which was reflected in the December 2024 proposal from the Chair for a draft decision by a Special Conference on the two mechanisms and the Chair's rolling text circulated shortly before this session.

The S&T section of the rolling text, which doesn't include any detail relating to a possible S&T mechanism, is focused on activities for governance of research such as codes of conduct, guidelines and regulations as well as for foresight techniques.

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>.