

Friday 15th August 2025

Scientific and technological (S&T) developments: discussions at WG6

The topic discussed on Wednesday and Thursday was ‘Measures on scientific and technological developments relevant to the Convention’. On Wednesday morning some additional statements were made on international cooperation and assistance (ICA) issues. By Thursday lunchtime, no further delegations wanted to take the floor for S&T discussions, the Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), therefore moved to the next item on the agenda ‘Measures on confidence-building and transparency’ that had been scheduled to start on Friday. Those discussions will be covered in a later report. Part of Thursday afternoon was also taken up with a further exchange of views in an informal setting on Article VII issues convened by the Friends of the Chair on that topic. The number of delegates in the plenary dropped during Thursday as many were called to assist their colleagues in the plastics treaty negotiations.

There was one working paper on S&T issues which was from Russia (WP.2) on fundamental principles of the proposed S&T mechanism.

Group statements were delivered by South Africa for the African Group and by China for Brazil, China and Pakistan. The Uganda statement delivered on behalf of the non-aligned on Tuesday included a section on S&T issues.

Discussions on S&T and the rolling text

Most interventions were in support, at least in principle, of the suggestions in the rolling text. Many positions reflected delegations’ overall positions on the BWC – i.e., those focused on security aspects of the BWC emphasised the inputs into understanding new threats and challenges from S&T review processes; while those focused on development issues highlighted ICA benefits. Significantly, neither side of this divergence was critical of the other perspective which generated an atmosphere of broad acceptance of other positions. As with any discussion about textual outputs, there were many interventions on potential clarifications or streamlining of language. None of these were discussed in any way that might indicate whether there was clear support for them around the room.

A number of statements highlighted the lack of effective S&T review in existing arrangements and the need for greater vigilance in this area. Not only should this vigilance need to be more detailed than before, but it should be constant and ongoing. There were explicit acknowledgements that promoting responsible innovation would underpin the right to peaceful uses under Article X. Such promotion would also have to be relevant to the diverse contexts around the globe in which research is carried out and thus arrangements would have to be inclusive.

As with any suggestion of doing something new, there were concerns raised about possible duplication. A number of references to sources of expertise or standards on biosafety and biosecurity were made with the encouragement that they should not be overlooked or forgotten by any BWC processes. Examples cited included World Health Organization (WHO) guidance on the responsible use of the life sciences and standards set by ISO, the International Organization for Standards.

Some paragraphs within the rolling text made specific references to particular technologies. There was caution expressed about being too specific as the text being

discussed was intended to be part of a Review Conference or Special Conference decision and S&T would move on and new areas of concern would emerge. The phrase used by some delegates was that the text should be ‘technology-agnostic’ in order to stand the test of time. [Note: many analysts have attributed the comprehensive coverage of the BWC itself across the life sciences for five decades to the fact it does not include in its definitions any particular technologies to be controlled. It is thus regarded as being as ‘future-proof’ as it could be.]

Some cost estimates for potential S&T activities were presented by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). These are to be posted, alongside other meeting documents, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

The proposed S&T review mechanism

There was a sense of frustration in many interventions that it was taking so long to adopt an S&T mechanism as well as the ICA mechanism. Phrases were used such as ‘it is time to move beyond aspirations’. While it is clear that there are some remaining issues to clarify there was a sense by many that the mechanisms should be adopted as soon as possible. [Note: while the proposed ICA and S&T mechanisms are distinct activities, political linkages have developed over the years, such that neither is likely to be adopted without the other and so progress on each of them relies on progress on the other. This has led to some mirroring of arrangements within each of the mechanisms.] There were fewer specific questions from the WG Chair, than there had been for the ICA mechanism.

Structure – as with the ICA mechanism, there is a wider group comprising all states parties which in the S&T proposal is known as the Review Group; and there is a smaller group called the Reporting Committee. The question of how the membership of the Reporting Committee should be selected remains outstanding. It was noted that the parallels with the ICA mechanism are less useful as the membership of the Committee should be based on individual independent expertise whereas the ICA Steering Group would be comprised of representatives from governments. In trying to find a precedent for a procedure for selection of the smaller group for each of the mechanisms, the Chair noted that each BWC Review Conference appoints a General Committee (sometimes referred to as the Bureau) that is about the same size as the smaller bodies in the two mechanisms. There was some discussion of the logic of this process which did not reach any firm conclusions. To ensure geographical balance, the role of regional groups is important. The BWC has only three regional groups with fairly long formal names but which can be summarised as the Western Group, the Eastern Group and the Non-Aligned Group. These are rooted in the Cold War-era origins of the BWC. Russia has declared itself to be a ‘Group of One’, a move not without its own controversies. Many interventions made reference to the limitations this group system would have for selection of membership of the Reporting Committee. The most common suggestion for use in this case was the UN system of five regional groups.

Outputs – both the smaller and larger bodies will need to produce some form of reporting. The BWC has historically operated on the basis of consensus. However, the term consensus can be very different in an academic setting from a diplomatic one. In academic terms, a consensus can simply mean a broad agreement whereas in diplomacy it means a position that no one is actively disagreeing with. As the WG Chair has noted more than once, a diplomatic consensus is not one that everyone is happy about, but one that everyone can live with. There is still ambiguity about how outputs from an S&T mechanism would interact with national policy and assessment processes.

Scope – some questions were raised on the scope of the mechanism. Should it include compliance and verification issues, for example; especially if there is an open-ended working group on that topic established at the same time? Would each bring different perspectives into discussion or would this be a duplication of effort?

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>.