

**Joint NGO Statements to Biological Weapons Convention
Meetings of Experts
Geneva
30 August – 8 September 2021**

Mr Chair, Distinguished Representatives:

Thank you for providing the opportunity for the NGO community to make statements. We welcome your recognition that our voices, perspectives and experiences provide important contributions to BWC discussions.

Mr Chair,

The damaging effects disease can have on societies, whether natural, accidental or deliberate in origin, have been starkly illustrated in the current pandemic. International developments like the United Nations Biorisk Working Group, established by the Secretary-General, and efforts by states to develop a new international treaty on pandemics are concrete evidence of increasing awareness of the challenges that diseases pose to humankind. Biological weapons are tools for deliberate disease, and lessons from the current pandemic should therefore be drawn to enhance preparedness for future outbreaks of diseases that may be deliberate. The rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines and medical treatments has been possible through life sciences research, much of which is transnational, and this brings new hope for rapid countermeasures to any future deliberately introduced disease. But, as the current pandemic also demonstrates, challenges remain, such as communicating accurate information, distributing vaccines and therapeutics globally, and working collectively to understand the geneses of outbreaks. These issues must be paid particular attention in future preparedness planning.

While general issues of public health are beyond the scope of the BWC, effective public health measures are essential tools in the control of biological weapons. The more potential impacts of disease caused by biological weapons can be reduced, the smaller the incentive to develop and maintain such weapons becomes. If governments respond to the current pandemic with outcomes that not only reduce the impacts of existing infectious diseases, but that also enhance abilities to identify and contain new infectious diseases, this would not only be good for public health, it would be an extremely powerful action to counter biological weapons. Health and security are inexorably linked, and the Meetings of Experts have a significant role to play in advancing issues that could reduce the risks of future infectious disease outbreaks.

Mr Chair,

The statements below set out the NGO community's collective views on key action points for these Meetings of Experts. The action points listed in the [joint NGO Position Paper](#) produced at the start of the current intersessional cycle remain valid.

Cooperation and assistance (MX1)

Mr Chair,

International cooperation and assistance play important roles in strengthening the implementation of the BWC. To further progress cooperation and assistance, we call on States Parties to:

- Develop an action plan for Article X implementation.
- Adopt guidelines including common formats for Article X reporting.
- Create an ISU Cooperation Officer.
- Facilitate regional S&T dialogues focused on regional BWC-related interests and problems.
- Establish an open-ended working group to monitor, coordinate and review activities of cooperation and assistance.

We encourage States Parties to make use of the database for assistance requests and offers that is administered by the ISU, as appropriate for their national circumstances.

We also encourage States Parties to cooperate and collaborate with non-governmental entities. We particularly welcome your recognition, Mr Chair, that non-governmental entities can make, and have made, practical contributions to further the objectives of the BWC. For decades, [hundreds of NGOs](#) across the globe have funded or supported biosecurity and biosafety activities to assist States Parties in their work. Despite the pandemic, NGOs continued to remain engaged in biorisk management as demonstrated in the Henry L. Stimson Center and Georgetown University Center for Global Health Science & Security [2020 catalog](#) of NGO assistance activities in support of Article X of the BWC. These activities range from building expert networks focused on existing or emerging risks to concrete projects to build State Party capacity to reduce current national vulnerabilities or respond to biological threats. We encourage States Parties to familiarize themselves with this resource.

Science & technology (MX2)

Mr Chair,

Advances in life sciences and next-generation biotechnology continue at an unprecedented pace. These advances and their convergence with other scientific disciplines and emerging technologies have led to exciting applications to improve the wellbeing of humans and the natural world. The accidental or deliberate misuse of scientific innovations and technologies, however, present risks to global health and security. Moreover, decreasing cost and widespread access to advanced capabilities continue to lower barriers to utilizing many of these technologies and associated pathogens. Indeed, the rapid development of S&T may be outpacing necessary ethical and regulatory practices, and governments and civil society often struggle to anticipate emerging capabilities and to identify and implement appropriate oversight mechanisms, particularly for activities that occur outside the direct oversight of government programs.

The 2019 MX2 report articulated that “Broad support has been expressed to consider a systematic and structured science and technology review process in the framework of the Convention to monitor relevant developments and assess their potential implications” and noted that “Many States Parties spoke in favor of a voluntary code of conduct for scientists under the Convention.” Perhaps of all the Meetings of Experts, topics discussed under MX2 receive the broadest support. Numerous States Parties have expressed support, in principle, on several key topics, including on S&T review and the benefits of scientific codes of conduct, yet considerable work remains on the practical details.

We call on States Parties to:

- Establish a scientific review process to systematically monitor and review relevant global developments in S&T and report to States Parties. The review process would assist in identifying and forecasting S&T advances with potential relevance to the BWC, and in facilitating engagement between scientific and technical experts and the diplomatic community. We encourage constructive dialogue on S&T review through the remainder of this ISP, hopefully with agreement at the Ninth Review Conference, but failing that, during the next ISP.
- Create an ISU Science Officer with a mandate and associated resources to support the scientific review process.
- Consider S&T advances in the context of monitoring, investigation, and other systems that can increase confidence that biological activities are only being conducted for peaceful purposes.
- Review and endorse the “[Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists](#),” share them with scientific communities in their countries and regions, and deploy broad education and outreach efforts to emphasize the importance of mitigating risks associated with advanced life science research and technology. The guidelines are high-level principles that serve as a reference for a broad range of stakeholders to develop or amend national- or institutional-level codes of conduct, practices, protocols or regulations. Inspired by the [Hague Ethical Guidelines](#) that were developed by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines emerged from foundational work by China and Pakistan, and were developed collaboratively by InterAcademy Partnership leaders, Tianjin University’s Centre for Biosafety Research and Strategy, and Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Health Security, with input from scientists from 20 geographically diverse countries. The Guidelines were recently [endorsed](#) by the InterAcademy Partnership.
- Develop and share model approaches to national science policy that enable States Parties to effectively raise awareness of the security dimensions of life science research, promote research integrity and the responsible use of science, enhance accountability practices among practitioners, and foster access to emerging capabilities. It is also important to incorporate convergent domains of scientific endeavor, in particular computer and information sciences, on which the life sciences increasingly depend.

National implementation (MX3)

Mr Chair,

We urge States Parties to adopt and implement the necessary legal measures, in accordance with their constitutional processes, to prohibit and prevent the development, production, stockpiling, transfer, acquisition, retention and use of biological weapons, and to ensure the safety and security of biological agents and toxins used for peaceful activities. States Parties that have not yet drafted and adopted implementing legislation should do so. States Parties that have already adopted legislation to give effect to the BWC should review their legislation in light of new understandings and agreements under the Convention and advances in science and technology.

There are different national approaches to implementing the provisions of the Convention. We therefore encourage States Parties to share their practical experiences and report any legislation and regulations under the CBM mechanism. We note the importance of assistance tools and programs in this area and recognize the crucial work of the ISU.

We welcome the positive trend of increasing numbers of CBM submissions in the last few years, with 2020 a record high in spite of the pandemic. States Parties should continue to submit CBMs as a tool for promoting transparency and building confidence, and to make use of the electronic CBM platform. We encourage States Parties to make their CBMs public, and to ensure that there is consistency between the reports that are submitted on a yearly basis. We also encourage States Parties to share national experiences, challenges and initiatives associated with biorisk management education and awareness-raising, codes of conduct for life scientists, and biosafety and biosecurity measures developed both within and outside the BWC to facilitate implementation of the Convention.

The Sixth BWC Review Conference in 2006 decided that each State Party should designate a National Point of Contact for coordinating national implementation of the Convention. We welcome recent increases in the number of contact points that have been identified, and we encourage States Parties that have not yet identified a National Point of Contact to do so without delay.

Finally, we encourage all States Parties to continue to engage with all stakeholders, including the NGO community, to facilitate both the universalisation and effective implementation of the BWC.

Assistance, response and preparedness (MX4)

Madam Chair,

We recall that, in light of the recent West Africa Ebola virus epidemic, the 2014 Meeting of States Parties reiterated the value of considering lessons learned from combatting infectious disease to inform discussions on the strengthening of Article VII.

In his remarks to the Security Council in July 2020, the UN Secretary-General noted that “the [COVID-19] pandemic also highlights the risks of bioterrorist attacks, and has already shown

some of the ways in which preparedness might fall short if a disease were to be deliberately manipulated to be more virulent, or intentionally released in multiple places at once.” The Secretary-General emphasised that in order to improve the international response to future disease threats, serious attention should be devoted to preventing the deliberate use of disease as a weapon. This includes enhancing the role of the BWC as a forum for the consideration of preventative measures, robust response capacities, and effective countermeasures.

We welcome the webinar on “Assistance, Response, and Preparedness” that the BWC ISU held in November 2020 to consider issues of relevance to the implementation of Article VII. We positively acknowledge the increasing degree of convergence and cross-regional support among States Parties on this issue, as demonstrated by the joint initiative of France and India to further dialogue on the establishment of an Article VII assistance database.

Strengthening Article VII is an essential element of the process of countering biological threats and ensuring the integrity of the international norm against biological weapons. There have been multiple efforts over the years to work towards operationalising Article VII, but there is still a considerable amount of work left to do. We strongly encourage States Parties to build upon the 2019 considerations and achievements. To continue to take meaningful concrete steps towards the operationalisation of Article VII, we specifically urge States Parties to:

- Continuously share national experiences, challenges and initiatives associated with assistance, response and preparedness efforts in order to develop an international repertoire of best practices.
- Identify practical mechanisms and measures for promoting and enhancing the role of the BWC in preventing and responding to deliberate biological events.
- Strengthen coordination and cooperation between States Parties and with relevant international and regional organisations (e.g. WHO, OIE, OPCW, UN FAO, INTERPOL), in order to ensure timely and effective international response in case of a biological emergency.
- Adopt procedures for requesting assistance under Article VII.
- Develop procedures, including additional resources for the maintenance of an assistance database, to improve the prompt and efficient response without preconditions to a request of assistance by a State Party under Article VII.
- Develop action and implementation plans to strengthen capacity building for the early identification, response and mitigation of disease outbreaks, whether natural, accidental or deliberate in origin.
- Support a more robust and rapidly deployable investigative team capability to further strengthen the UN Secretary-General’s Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons (UNSGM).

Institutional strengthening (MX5)

Madam Chair,

COVID-19 has impacted BWC meeting schedules and format. Procedural delays, including to the current MXs and the upcoming MSP as well as the Ninth Review Conference, illustrate some of the drawbacks of restricting decision-making authority to Review Conferences. The BWC faces numerous dynamic challenges, including a continuously evolving biological threat landscape and rapidly advancing biological science capabilities, and the treaty must similarly adapt and evolve to remain effective and relevant. We call on States Parties to utilize annual meetings to take necessary decisions. We also encourage States Parties to institute options for remote participation. These steps not only promote a robust and adaptable BWC, but also mitigate the risk of losing valuable decision-making opportunities due to delayed, suspended, or cancelled meetings.

COVID-19 has also highlighted the need for a global mechanism to provide independent, transparent, and accredited fact-checking of major biological events. The pandemic provided stark illustration that the inevitable uncertainty surrounding the origin of biological events can fuel speculation and mistrust that can have cascading global effects. These effects would be far worse if there was any suspicion of a deliberate origin, and the BWC is well positioned to establish a trusted clearinghouse for gathering and analyzing information related to the origin of significant biological events. This capacity would be directly valuable for suspected deliberate events, but it could also provide benefit for other large-scale health emergencies. We encourage States Parties to investigate the potential role of the BWC in facilitating this type of analysis to promote global stability during major biological events.

When States Parties established the ISU at the Sixth Review Conference, it became the central institution of the BWC. We reiterate our call for States Parties to ensure reliable and sustainable support for the ISU, including effective financing, and we continue to encourage States Parties to expand the ISU's budget, personnel and mandate to further strengthen the unit and enable it to better support treaty implementation and universalization. States Parties continually recognize and applaud the hard work and dedication of the ISU and its vital role in supporting the treaty and related activities around the world. We urge States Parties to take the necessary steps at the Ninth Review Conference to provide long-term stability for ISU personnel and to establish the ISU as a permanent fixture of the BWC.

Finally, we encourage States Parties to identify and evaluate all appropriate mechanisms to strengthen the implementation of the BWC and ensure the broadest use of biology for peaceful purposes. We urge States Parties to develop concrete proposals for substantive discussion at the Ninth Review Conference and during the subsequent ISP. In addition to new or informal mechanisms implemented outside the explicit scope of the BWC, we encourage States Parties to further investigate the use of consultation and clarification procedures under Article V of the treaty. As a mechanism that already exists as a formal part of the BWC, Article V is a valuable tool to mitigate uncertainty and increase transparency regarding States Parties' activities in the life sciences.

Over the course of the current ISP, MX5 has provided considerable value in furthering discussions of complex and important issues related to the institutional strength and implementation of the BWC. As we look ahead to the Ninth Review Conference, we call on States Parties to include institutional strengthening as a topic for further discussion in the next ISP and to consider expanding the time allocated to this theme.

Cross-cutting issues

While this statement has been designed such that the sections for each MX above can be read out in the relevant meeting, there are also some cross-cutting issues that should be reflected.

A key cross-cutting issue is funding. Funding of the ISU, the Convention as a whole, and the wider NGO community remains a critical issue. While the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the resources of many States Parties and non-governmental entities to their limits, we believe the need to secure and strengthen the prohibitory norm against biological weapons in the face of evolving scientific and technological changes has never been stronger. Biorisk management must be given heightened political prominence.

We urge States Parties to pay their assessed annual contributions in full and as early as possible, and we call on all States Parties currently in arrears to settle their accounts without delay. While the pandemic has put financial strain on all countries, we encourage States Parties in a position to do so to contribute to the Working Capital Fund to provide additional flexibility for 2021 and 2022 meeting planning, particularly in light of the Ninth Review Conference taking place much earlier in the year than originally scheduled.

A second key cross-cutting issue is the growing interest in the topic of “gender and disarmament” within the BWC. We are pleased that in 2019, the First Committee resolution on the BWC included gender language for the first time—encouraging the equitable participation of women and men. We also welcome the increasing number of side events and webinars on the topic. Advocacy for women’s equal participation and recognition of the gendered impacts of biological weapons should be further promoted.

A more robust reflection of the gendered norms associated with weapons, war and violence is crucial for effectively addressing the challenges associated with the proliferation and use of weapons in and out of conflict. We encourage delegates to reflect on historical notions of gender and power, including underlying assumptions of violent masculinity and passive femininity, and to address the obstacles these assumptions pose to contemporary non-proliferation and disarmament within the BWC.

Looking to the longer term

Mr Chair,

While the current focus is naturally on the MXs and the upcoming MSP, there is a need to think in the longer term and, in particular, to what the outcomes of the Ninth Review Conference might be. Each of the MXs has topics under discussion that will form contributions to the Review Conference, but none stands alone. As this is the last series of MXs before the Review Conference, it may be productive to consider how the subject matter in each MX overlaps or enhances that in others. For example, effective science and technology review can enhance implementation of Article X, or capacity-building under Article X can enhance response under Article VII.

This set of MXs meets almost exactly half a century after the text for the BWC was agreed in late September 1971. There is much that has been achieved in that time, but considerably more that must be done to keep the world safe from disease as a weapon, today, tomorrow and for the next 50 years.

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