

Wednesday 13th August 2025

International cooperation and assistance: discussions at WG6

The Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) discussed the topic of 'Measures on cooperation and assistance under Article X' on Monday and Tuesday. Part of Monday morning was taken up with relatively brief opening formalities and the Helen Clark video. Part of Tuesday afternoon was taken up with an exchange of views in an informal setting on Article VII issues convened by the Friends of the Chair on that topic – Sofie Kallehauge (Denmark) and Angel Dalmazzo (Argentina).

The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has opened plenary meetings promptly which some delegates are not used to. He also stressed he wanted to maximize working time and so wanted to keep interactions in the room focused on the BWC and not let external geopolitics take time from the discussions.

Many interventions during these two days welcomed the two new states parties, Comoros and Kiribati, and both attended the WG. Some states parties participated in the WG for the first time, such as Bhutan and Gambia.

There were two ICA-focused working papers made available during the two days. One was from Russia (WP.1) on operational principles for the ICA mechanism. The other was from Australia (WP.4) on its Article X activities in the Indo-Pacific.

There were three group statements made in plenary: by South Africa on behalf of the African Group, by Cabo Verde on behalf of the Portuguese-speaking states and by Uganda on behalf of the non-aligned. There were numerous states parties making interventions and listing them would take up too much space.

Discussions on ICA and the rolling text

There was a solid set of agreed elements around the need for improved ICA activities. However, as in earlier discussions, there was a variety of positions taken on how to turn aspiration into reality. Old divergences on sanctions and export controls were raised without really moving the debate forward. The main items in the rolling text such as an 'International Biosecurity Education Network', a 'Laboratory Network' and a 'capacity-building fellowship programme' received positive comments. Some saw these as new suggestions while others saw them as logical extensions of things already being done. Concerns were raised about duplication with activities under other international regimes that had some similarities, such as other laboratory networks. Some felt the rolling text contained superfluous detail while others felt they needed more details on what was being proposed. As the rolling text is to focus discussion on what the WG might recommend to the Tenth Review Conference (2027), or a Special Conference, the suggestion was made to reformulate it as if it were a draft decision of either Conference.

Some cost estimates for possible activities were provided by the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU). These have been posted, alongside other meeting documents, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>

Discussions on the proposed mechanism

The desire for an effective mechanism was expressed by numerous delegations. However, it was apparent from the views expressed that there was no clear shared perception of what

would constitute effectiveness. There was significant consensus on many elements of the proposal by the Chair from December 2024, but also some areas to be resolved which the Chair specifically asked delegates to consider.

Structure – there was common ground that there should be a ‘Steering Group’ comprised of up to 20 states to manage the implementation of the mechanism but there remained a question over how these should be selected. Could BWC observers such as the EU be part of it? There was consensus that there should be an ‘Advisory Group’ composed of all states parties, but as a distinct activity or more practical to make it an agenda item of the annual Meeting of States Parties (MSP)? There were arguments both ways with no clear conclusion. One issue was whether the Advisory Group could question what the Steering Group had proposed as its package of annual activities. Some interventions expressed a desire for this, arguing that all states parties should have an input into the decisions within the ICA mechanism. Others suggested that to have the larger group revisiting in detail the work of the smaller group would duplicate effort and possibly lead to a lack of consensus if there were disagreements in the larger group. This implied the larger group could take decisions. Over the years, the question of whether MSPs could take decisions has been controversial – there are some who insist that a Review Conference is the only BWC body that can take decisions; others suggest that a Review Conference can delegate any of its powers to another meeting. There seemed to be common ground that the Advisory Group could not be given greater powers than an MSP. A rhetorical question was posed – since the states parties attending an MSP are the same as go to a Review Conference, and are often sitting in the same room for each gathering, how is it we can trust them to have the wisdom to be correct only once in every five years?

ICA Trust Fund – should the source of funds be wholly voluntary, wholly from assessed contributions, or some form of hybrid arrangement? Arguments in favour of voluntary funding included that it allowed for flexibility and that there had been successful examples of fundraising this way. The arguments against included that it reduced predictability of funding as available funds may vary between years. This discussion also revealed a sometimes rather subtle distinction between those who perceived voluntary contributions to such a fund as donations and those who saw them as an investment in greater security for all against biological threats. Arguments expressed in favour of assessed contributions included that all states parties would have ‘ownership’ of the mechanism and those against included that this would mean developing countries were paying towards their own assistance. There was some discussion on whether projects under the mechanism should be voluntary funded while assessed contributions covered the administrative costs. It was highlighted that the Trust Fund for the Arms Trade Treaty is administered using voluntary funds. Pakistan revisited a proposal it had made in WP.13 of WG2 which featured ‘voluntary but assessed contributions’ to ensure predictability which garnered some supportive responses but also concerns that targets for funding generated this way might become limits instead.

Cost share contribution – this remained perhaps the area of strongest divergence. Many interventions suggested that even a small contribution by the recipient state would be seen as a barrier to participation; others repeated the ownership and sustainability arguments that have been made previously in favour of such a contribution.

Should being in financial arrears preclude access to the ICA mechanism? – this also remained inconclusive, although positions in favour of this were much less strongly held than for the cost share contribution. Those opposed saw this as another potential barrier to participation.

Editorial Note: in times past there would often be a disconnect in BWC meeting rooms between diplomats and scientists – each were trying to get to grips with the perspectives of the other and it took some time to find some common working practices. In an echo of this, there now seems to be a similar disconnect between diplomats and project implementers. Working through this may be key to success in the ICA area.

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>.