

Tuesday 19th August 2025

Confidence-building and transparency plus taking stock: discussions at WG6

The third plenary topic at the Sixth Session of the Working Group (WG) on the strengthening of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BWC/BTWC) was ‘Measures on confidence-building and transparency’ – topic (c) of those allocated by the Ninth BWC Review Conference (2022). Discussion on this topic had been scheduled for Friday and Monday (15th and 18th) but started on Thursday as proceedings had been running ahead of schedule. The Chair of the WG, Ambassador Frederico S Duque Estrada Meyer (Brazil), has moved on to the next scheduled topic when the previous one has been exhausted for the moment. In addition, time was found on Friday afternoon to have an open exchange taking stock of the current situation.

Before the stock take session, there was a brief further look at costs for scientific and technological (S&T) activities including the proposed mechanism. One notable point was if the costs of travel for experts for the smaller body were not funded via assessed contributions would this compromise their independence?

Confidence-building and transparency

Discussion on this topic started with a briefing by Daniel Feakes, Chief of the BWC Implementation Support Unit (ISU), who described how the CBM system operated. He noted positive trends in numbers, especially for those submitting for the first time. This presentation has been posted, alongside other meeting documents and statements, to the official WG6 web page at <https://meetings.unoda.org/meeting/75240/>.

The subsequent discussion included a number of general points but otherwise was very focused around points in the rolling text circulated by the Chair shortly before WG6.

There were many references to CBMs being the only formal transparency tool under the Convention. They are considered a practical way to build trust. They can promote compliance but not be used to assess it as they are not designed as compliance tools. Nonetheless, the connections with compliance and verification were prominent in the discussions. While it was noted that there was some overlap with the sorts of information that might have to be submitted as declarations under a verification system, it was made clear that they could not be the model for declarations. In short, CBMs are what they are and cannot simply be dropped into a compliance and verification system. Some delegations expressed a preference for developing verification measures rather than improving CBMs.

Methods by which CBMs might be improved were discussed. It was noted that any proposals for additions to reporting have to be carefully considered – the balance between extensiveness of information supplied (more useful to understand national activities) and reporting burden (greater burden being likely to reduce the number of returns) was considered important. Simplification of the process of submitting returns was seen as useful but a note of caution was expressed that electronic platforms should not be the exclusive method of submission in case it leaves states parties behind who can only use other methods of submission. Bhutan suggested that the primary obstacle to producing returns was resource availability rather than political will and that any review of

CBMs should heed the lived experience of smaller states. This was echoed by other delegations. Initial submissions via the step-by-step approach were encouraged, but that this should only be a transition phase with full returns remaining the aim.

While most suggestions in the rolling text were accepted as being based on past proposals, the CBM assistance network was highlighted as to whether it was a new proposal. This was first put forward in 2012 and has resurfaced in various forms since. It was noted that activities to promote and enable compilation of CBM returns had considerable overlap with international cooperation and assistance (ICA) efforts under the BWC. Questions were asked about the number and types of CBM-related training events as they had been held at global, regional and national levels. It was noted that different courses had different focuses. A delegate from Belarus highlighted that they had participated in a CBM course, confirming that it was of high quality and that the course was not politicized.

There was much restating of previous positions about whether CBM returns were completely voluntary or whether their politically binding nature encompassed some obligations to participate. The suggestion for resolving this divergence by making CBM returns mandatory was supported in a number of interventions. There were calls for more CBM returns to be made public.

While much of the discussion was focused on CBMs, there were other voluntary transparency measures mentioned, such as peer review or the creation of an exchange platform. Some interventions expressed support for inclusion of references in the rolling text to voluntary measures while others expressed opposition to this.

Taking stock on Friday afternoon

With the WG running ahead of schedule, the Chair took the opportunity to invite delegates to indicate briefly one or two issues they considered most essential to resolve in the areas discussed so far in WG6 with the aim of seeking greater clarity of where delegates saw the greatest need for further work and where convergence might be close. He also asked delegates where they were aiming for in terms of potential cost implications of proposals currently under discussion and whether cost estimates should be a determining factor in shaping the scope and composition of the mechanisms.

The most common response to priorities was for establishing the ICA and S&T mechanisms. There were recollections of the energy of the Ninth Review Conference which, before the political challenges of the final few days, had some very positive moments. In relation to the two mechanisms, the Final Document from 2022 says ‘decides to develop’ and this was highlighted as meaning the decision to develop the mechanisms has already been taken by the Review Conference. This was contrasted with the mandate for discussion of the seven topics. The selection of the smaller bodies in each of the mechanisms as well as governance of the mechanisms were highlighted as issues needing resolving.

Overall, the tone of the exchanges was more positive than much of the discussions on the specific agenda items had been, although there were points made by delegations that have blocked progress in the past that illustrated key divergences remain.

It was noted that there was no scenario in which the BWC could be strengthened without an increase in its budget. Ambassador Leonardo Bencini (Italy), President of the Ninth Review Conference, noted how modest the BWC budget was and, with a tone of frustration, said: ‘There is a complete imbalance between the risk that we are facing and the resources that we have been willing to devote to this so far.’ He added: ‘if we are talking about strengthening the BWC, we have to be ready to put more money into it’.

Desires were expressed for the WG to finish its mandate effectively and within the allotted timeframe. There were many expressions of flexibility by delegations, which were welcomed by the Chair, and which indicated political will to make progress. The Chair thanked delegates for sharing their views.

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>.