

Ninth Review Conference of the States Parties to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction

2 December 2022

English only

Geneva, 28 November to 16 December 2022

Item 12 of the agenda

Follow-up to the recommendations and decisions of the Eighth Review Conference and the question of future review of the Convention

Engaging the Next Generation in Global Biosecurity: Proposals for strengthening youth participation in the Biological Weapons Convention

Submitted by Kenya and Panama

I. Introduction

1. The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) constitutes a strong global norm against the threats to global biosecurity arising from the deliberate release of biological agents or toxins. The goal of a world free of biological weapons cannot be achieved without the active and transformative engagement of young women and men in multilateral processes taking place in the framework of the BWC.

2. The world today is home to the largest generation of youth in history. The global population of young people between the ages of 10 and 24 numbers 1.8 billion (a quarter of the world's population), 90 percent of whom reside in developing countries. Yet, many young people in all regions, in particular from the Global South, face barriers and challenges because of their age, and thus limiting their opportunities and potential. This is particularly acute for those belonging to vulnerable groups who have historically suffered multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

3. Armed conflicts disproportionately affect young people, particularly young women, and perpetuate existing forms of violence against them. In a scenario of biological warfare, besides the loss of life, physical and psychological harm, young people are likely to suffer its severe and long-lasting social, cultural, economic and political impacts. The COVID-19 pandemic already provides a window into the “systematic, deep and disproportionate” effects of biological events on youth wellbeing and mental health, especially for young women and in lower-income countries.¹

4. Youth perspectives in global biosecurity are needed to foster innovative solutions and sustain long-term engagement. Engaging and training early career professionals in global biosecurity now will allow BWC policymakers to access their expertise tomorrow. Graduate students and early career professionals also make up for a large part of biosecurity professionals on the ground level, including in laboratories or within frontline healthcare workforce. Their practical experience is needed to understand how policy can match challenges in the field.

¹ See Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on job, education, rights and mental well-being. International Labour Organization. 2020. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm



5. The important role of youth in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security have been reaffirmed by UN Security Council resolution 2250 (2015) on Youth, Peace and Security, UN General Assembly resolution 74/64 entitled “Youth, disarmament and non-proliferation”, and their subsequent resolutions.

6. The Secretary-General of the United Nations underscores in his Agenda for Disarmament that young people are the ultimate force for change, at the local, national and international levels, to make the world safer and more secure for all. In addition, “Our Common Agenda”, by the Secretary-General includes recommendations for meaningful, diverse and effective youth involvement in United Nations deliberative and decision-making processes.

7. Over the past years, many States Parties and other stakeholders have recognized the need to promote the participation of young people more systematically in the deliberations held under the BWC as well as the value of capacity building programmes in biosafety and biosecurity and platforms involving young scientists, including the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs’ Youth for Disarmament and Youth for Biosecurity Initiative.

8. The present working paper seeks to raise awareness of the positive contributions of young people in developing new ideas to reduce threats from biological weapons through the Youth Declaration for Biosecurity. It also suggests tangible actions that States Parties could agree on at the Ninth Review Conference to further promote meaningful participation by young people in global biosecurity.

II. About the Youth Declaration for Biosecurity

9. Youth-led structures and initiatives have proven to be an important source of leadership and agency for young people. In the framework of the BWC, these platforms can certainly enhance and support our collective endeavours to build bridges between science and diplomacy.

10. During the current BWC intersessional programme, many youth-led groups have joined forces as a coordinated network to foster collaboration and capacity-building for young people and to promote activities in the margins of BWC official meetings with one common message: the next generation of professionals in the field of life sciences and in other fields of science relevant to the BWC needs to be engaged in multilateral discussions related to emerging biosafety and biosecurity threats and responses.

11. The Youth Declaration for Biosecurity², launched in the margins of the BWC Meeting of States Parties in November 2021, is the outcome of these efforts and emanated from the Youth for Biosecurity Initiative³, implemented by the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) with the support of the European Union (EU) under EU Council Decision 2019/97⁴.

12. After the conclusion of the Second Edition of the Biosecurity Diplomacy Workshop for Young Scientists from the Global South that was held in 2021, a group of young scientists decided to develop this call-to-action containing a set of recommendations to reduce the threat of biological weapons and to support youth participation in global biosecurity.

13. This initiative was subsequently discussed among young leaders in biosecurity and biosafety from organizations around the globe, including: Nuclear Threat Initiative Global Biological Policy and Programs Team (NTI | bio), the International Federation of Biosafety Associations (IFBA), the International Genetically Engineered Machine Foundation (iGEM), the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security (CHS), and the Next Generation Global Health Security Network (NextGen).

² <https://www.un.org/disarmament/bwc-youth-declaration-for-biosecurity/>.

³ <https://www.un.org/disarmament/biological-weapons/eu-support-to-the-bwc/youth-for-biosecurity-initiative/>.

⁴ <https://www.un.org/disarmament/biological-weapons/eu-support-to-the-bwc>.

14. The Youth Declaration for Biosecurity outlines concrete recommendations for State Parties to the BWC:

- (a) Introduce a BWC Scientific Advisory Group, including youth representatives;
- (b) Create a clear pipeline for biosecurity career advancement;
- (c) Adopt global ethical guidelines and best practices, including the “Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists”;
- (d) Prioritize diversity in youth inclusion;
- (e) Build partnerships linking scientific and policy expertise;
- (f) Standardize biotechnology review and biorisk management;
- (g) Increase biosafety and biosecurity awareness; and
- (h) Build national and regional capacity to rapidly prevent, detect, report, and respond to unusual infectious diseases outbreaks.
- (i) Enhance technology development, diffusion, transfer and commercialisation.

III. Proposals for the Ninth Review Conference

15. Young people offer perspectives that are critical, forward-looking and grounded in their particular needs, expertise and experiences. Their active and meaningful participation in BWC-related debates and implementation’s activities can greatly contribute to devise innovative and sustainable solutions to the contemporary challenges.

16. The Ninth Review Conference provides the opportunity for States Parties to explore pathways to enhance youth engagement and create space and enabling environment for the next generation of professionals in the field of life sciences and in other fields of science relevant to the BWC to make meaningful substantive contributions in upholding the global norm against biological weapons, and thus building and supporting disarmament, peace and security.

17. In this regard, Kenya and Panama are pleased to submit the Youth Declaration for Biosecurity as an annex to this working paper and respectfully suggest that the Ninth Review Conference of the BWC considers the following practical proposals:

- (a) Welcome the Youth Declaration for Biosecurity and encourage States Parties to incorporate the perspective of youth in policy discussions;
- (b) Encourage States Parties and other stakeholders to broadly disseminate and raise awareness about the Declaration with national authorities and institutions, the scientific community and academia, among others, to exchange information, experiences and good practices about its dissemination and implementation, and to present the outcomes of these efforts during the next intersessional work programme;
- (c) Invite States Parties and other stakeholders to include youth representatives in their delegations to the BWC meetings and activities;
- (d) Promote youth representation, together with geographical representation and gender balance, as a criteria for the composition of possible future bodies, such as a possible science and technology review mechanism, Cooperation Committee (Article X), etc.
- (e) Encourage States Parties to create opportunities for young people to pursue careers in life sciences, biosecurity and biosafety, science diplomacy and in other fields relevant to the BWC in order to maximize the benefits of scientific discoveries for the prevention of diseases and epidemics, the achievement of sustainable development and other peaceful purposes;
- (f) Explore additional measures that could effectively advance youth engagement at the BWC, with options including the creation of a funded platform that would ensure permanent and structured youth participation in the BWC meetings and activities as an ongoing component of the intersessional programme to assist States Parties in their

implementation efforts (i.e., an annual youth forum). States Parties could endorse and support existing youth-centred or youth-led networks such as the Youth for Biosecurity Initiative and consider as an example platform established in other regimes for weapons of mass destruction, such as the CTBTO Youth Group.

Annex

The Youth Declaration for Biosecurity

Preamble

We, young scientists, and researchers from around the world recommend new actions on Youth, Biosecurity, Biosafety, Disarmament, and Non-Proliferation of biological weapons. The importance of youth in raising awareness and formulating strategies to mitigate the threat of biological weapons is acknowledged in the framework of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and in Action 38 of the disarmament agenda presented by the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres. We call for all BWC States Parties and stakeholders to consider the following sections to empower and engage with young people to create a world free from biological threats.

Declaration

A. Recommended Actions to Support Youth

There are immediate actions that both the BWC and State Parties can take to support youth participation in global biosecurity:

Introduce a BWC Scientific Advisory Group

We support the creation of a Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) to assist in the implementation of the BWC articles. The SAG can provide expert advice on science and technology to State Parties and to the Implementation Support Unit under the BWC. This advisory body should represent diverse stakeholders, such as scientists, policy professionals, and diplomats while maintaining an appropriate balance of age, gender, and geography. This SAG should assess the new developments in the life sciences and provide periodic reports to the BWC and member states on the prevention and mitigation of potentially harmful effects. We believe that the appropriate representation of youth and engagement with young scientists through the SAG would be essential for its success.

Create a clear pipeline for biosecurity career advancement

We call for the inclusion of a Biorisk Management education as part of undergraduate and graduate curricula for biology, chemistry, biochemistry, public policy, and other related majors. In addition, early- and mid-career scientists and policy professionals should receive education through workshops and training initiatives. There is an urgent need to provide training scholarships to low and middle-income countries (LMICs) to advance and strengthen professional skills. Free online courses and resources should be made available to professionals in the Global South. We support the continuation and expansion of the Youth4Biosecurity initiative and other similar activities.

Adopt global ethical guidelines and best practices

We call for the global adoption of the ‘Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists’⁵ to ensure ethical and responsible conduct in biological research. In addition, we support the sharing of biorisk management knowledge and best practices at national, regional, and global levels to create uniform norms and standards. This will support youth by creating a shared global language and set of practices to foster collaboration among

⁵ Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, Tianjin University Center for Biosafety Research and Strategy, Interacademies Partnership. “The Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines for Codes of Conduct for Scientists.” July 2021. <https://www.interacademies.org/publication/tianjin-biosecurity-guidelines-codes-conduct-scientists>.

emerging scientists and biosecurity leaders across regions. We call for the creation of appropriate mechanisms to facilitate this through the BWC.

Prioritize diversity in youth inclusion

We support the greater inclusion of diverse voices in biorisk management. We call for increased youth representation in all biosecurity-related matters on different platforms. We encourage mainstreaming youth participation in all deliberations through appropriate youth quotas in the respective delegations and representation of youth bodies such as young science academies. We also call for qualitative and quantitative standards to ensure diversity across gender, ethnic, cultural, and geographic backgrounds in deliberations and decision-making processes. Youth from the Global South are severely underrepresented due to a lack of awareness and available opportunities, therefore special mechanisms are needed to increase their participation.

B. Further Actions Endorsed by Youth

In addition to the specific actions outlined above, we also endorse the following more general principles to strengthen global biosecurity capacity:

Build partnerships linking scientific and policy expertise

We call for partnerships linking scientists, science policy professionals, biosecurity experts, and diplomats. Biosecurity Science Diplomacy should be promoted as an area of active research involving practitioners and academics. These linkages should reinforce strong scientific advisory mechanisms to inform policy-makers and diplomats. We support thematic, regional, and global partnerships with all stakeholders, including the NGOs, industry, and academic bodies, to fulfill the objectives of the BWC. These partnerships should focus on research, awareness-raising, and capacity building to complement ongoing BWC-ISU activities. Furthermore, we call for increased North-South and South-South cooperation to empower youth, especially women from the Global South, in biosecurity. We encourage partnerships between science organizations, academies, and associations. Think tanks, NGOs, and academic centers should be engaged based on their respective strengths and areas of interest. A global network of these stakeholders should be created to facilitate interdisciplinary, multinational, and cross-sectoral communication and collaborations. The BWC-ISU could provide the mandate and resources to create and lead this network.

Standardize biotechnology review and biorisk management

We recognize the importance of having a robust Biorisk Management System in place at life science institutions and the integral role they could play in implementing BWC mandates. We call for the adoption of such systems and standards⁶ by all institutions involved in life science research. We encourage the creation of an integrated framework for oversight of strategic plans to minimize the potential dual-use of life sciences research.

This framework should be created after consultation with relevant stakeholders and should contain action points or policies at institutional, national, and international levels to prevent the weaponization of biological agents and toxins and timely respond to these challenges. A comprehensive biorisk assessment and management tool can be used to ensure the successful implementation of the framework. The tool should assess risks while also recognizing benefits and should be relatable and adaptable to all Member States.

In addition to experts and policymakers, we recommend the inclusion of young researchers, laboratorians, and youth-driven scientific organizations in the recurring intersectional discourse on the development and implementation of biorisk management systems within the BWC.

⁶ Standards such as the ISO 35001 (Biorisk management for laboratories and other related organizations) and the *WHO Laboratory Biosafety Manual, 4th Edition*.

Increase biosafety and biosecurity awareness

We support biosafety and biosecurity awareness initiatives through various means, such as informational events, open-access publications, and social media. Different strategies must be employed to inform and engage diverse stakeholders such as scientists, policy researchers, institutes, diplomats, policy-makers, and the general public. We call for more conversation across disciplines to develop and disseminate a more comprehensive understanding of biosecurity. International organizations such as UNODA, UNRCPD, UNIDIR, and UNLIREC play a leading role in facilitating these discussions.

Build national and regional capacity

We support capacity building and harmonization of national and regional guidelines to rapidly prevent, detect, report, and respond to unusual infectious diseases outbreaks. Further, we call for the exchange of biosecurity best practices at national and regional levels.
