

**Eighth 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**

4 May 2016

English only

Preparatory Committee
Geneva, 26-27 April and 8-12 August 2016
Item 5 of the agenda
General exchange of views

Peer review: an innovative way to strengthen the BWC

Submitted by Belgium, France, Luxemburg and Netherlands

1. Over the past 15 years, States Parties have been looking for innovative ways to strengthen confidence in the implementation of the Convention. The Peer review mechanism is a concept France has been continuously promoting since the 7th Review Conference in 2011. The Peer review concept in the framework of the BWC was meant to be a concrete and innovative initiative.
2. After the French pilot exercise in 2013, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg decided to launch a Peer review exercise in 2015, which has proved to be very successful. We are confident that new initiatives will continue to demonstrate the relevance of this concept in the run-up to the Eighth Review Conference.


The benefits to the Convention:

3. There are several expected benefits of this proposed mechanism:
 - (a) Further enhancing and improving national implementation: the Peer review exercises provide a good opportunity to share best practices through the review provided by foreign qualified experts and also to raise national stakeholders' awareness about the BWC.
 - (b) Building confidence amongst States Parties through increased transparency: the Peer review exercises match with the request of several States Parties asking for better information.
 - (c) Providing the opportunity to develop international cooperation, while fully respecting national sovereignty: Peer review exercises provide a good opportunity to establish contacts between different national agencies.

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The value of organizing exercises

4. One of the purposes of the exercises organized so far was to dispel possible concerns about the nature of the concept, to broaden its understanding and to facilitate its adaptation to the needs and realities of the BWC.

France (2013)

5. France presented in 2014 the lessons learned of the pilot exercise organized in December 2013 in Paris. Several topics related to the national implementation were presented: our national system of biosafety and biosecurity; our national export control system; and our awareness raising policy. Those topics were illustrated with two on-site visits (Institut Pasteur and Agence nationale de sécurité sanitaire de l'alimentation, de l'environnement et du travail). A large panel of experts, coming from 9 countries, actively participated in the review. Benelux (2015)

6. The Benelux countries decided to conduct a Peer review exercise among themselves based on a mutually developed and agreed format. They decided to give the CBMs a central role in the Peer review exercise to form the basis of the respective national implementation evaluation: form A and form E in particular. The Benelux Peer review consisted of 2 phases: a first phase during which written consultation took place between the three States; a second phase during which each individual Benelux-country organized an event and hosted the other two States (visiting peers) for a review through presentations and on-site visits. National biosafety and biosecurity systems were underlined as crucial elements of the respective national implementation efforts.

The main takeaways from those exercises:

7. Despite the different modalities of the two Peer reviews which took place in France and the Benelux, the following core principles and modalities were taken into account:

(a) Participation and feedback from foreign highly qualified experts are very useful for the host country to enhance the way the Convention can be implemented. It also allows for a substantive exchange among practitioners and the construction of a network of qualified experts, which can be developed along the road;

(b) Interactivity of exchanges, which allows for a better engagement at the level of experts;

(c) Collaborative exchanges on ways and means to improve the national implementation of the BTWC are useful to enhance understanding and build confidence;

(d) The choice of topics of interest to the practical implementation of the BWC, which allow to focus on relevant provisions and their implementation;

(e) On-site visits of facilities and opportunities to exchange with laboratory staff are essential for other States Parties to compare approaches in a way that goes beyond examining the text of laws and regulations and to see what the implications are in the field;

(f) Comprehensive review implying various national agencies can be very helpful to enhance interagency efforts within the host nation and to inform them about BWC related issues.

The relevance of the concept in the run up to the Eighth Review Conference

8. In our view, the aim of the work that has been undertaken so far should be to prepare the ground for consideration of the Peer review mechanism at the Eighth BWC Review Conference. Eight months ahead of the Review Conference, it is useful to dispel any misunderstandings.

9. Firstly, the Peer review mechanism is not a replacement to verification, but an improvement of compliance. The aim of the Peer review is to move ahead from this difficult debate in a workable, pragmatic way.

10. Secondly, we propose this innovative mechanism as an attempt to think “out of the box” of the traditional BWC debate. We are convinced that this method would enable the opening of a new dimension in improving the implementation of the Convention, complementary to the approach based on the CBMs. The voluntary nature of the Peer review mechanism represents a further strength of this innovative initiative.

11. Finally, if we want to achieve concrete progress at the BWC, we need to secure tangible results at the next Review Conference. Addressing the issue of the Peer review mechanism in the final report would be in our opinion a very good first step in that direction.
