

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE BWC: FINDING A WAY FORWARD

Geneva, 3 December 2017

Workshop Report



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Summary

- The meeting formed part of an on-going series of workshops deliberating current and future roles of civil society in relation to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).
- Limited to a small group of active BWC civil society stakeholders, the discussions focused on current political, diplomatic and scientific developments; civil society engagement with the BWC; and the potential for building an effective civil society coalition.
- Key points coming out of the discussion were that BWC civil society would benefit from: (1) a more global base and a focus on the younger generation of life scientists; (2) clearer messaging, potentially emphasising biothreat reduction and responsible science; and (3) a tighter, action-oriented BWC-focused community together with loose, broad network alliances.

Background

The Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) has traditionally been characterized by a particular kind of civil society engagement: mostly expert-based and highly technical, marked by quiet lobbying and supportive partnerships with national delegations on a variety of issues. The individuals involved tend to have long-term personal commitments to the treaty and often self-identify as ‘friends of the Convention.’ This is unlike civil society engagement in other areas of arms control. For instance, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), the international movement to monitor and control small arms use and proliferation, and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) can all be characterized by more collective, single-goal-oriented activism. There are good reasons for the different approaches; principally because the dynamics required to sustain and support an existing regime are different to those required to collectivise around creating a new one.

Civil society has a continuing and important role to play in supporting biological arms control and non-proliferation. But civil society must adapt if it is to continue successfully supporting the norm against the weaponization of disease. The BWC needs broader, less technical, but more connected, civil society engagement.

A December 2015 workshop, supported by Switzerland, brought together more than 30 participants from a wide variety of civil society organizations, research institutions, international organizations and a select group of states to explore ways in which to enhance the role and contribution of civil society to the BWC. The workshop demonstrated that it is possible to move discussions about civil society’s role in the field of biological weapons in a more constructive, energetic and action-oriented direction. Actors within the biological weapons control community are open to ideas and suggestions of actors from other fields, and actors not previously exposed to this issue can be interested in further engaging with the BWC. It was also clear, however, that more work needed to be done to provide a clearer rationale and objective for civil society and to develop an action-focused, energetic community in the context of the BWC. Workshops continuing discussion on civil society

engagement with the BWC were also held in June 2016 in Geneva and in October 2016 in Washington DC.

A key target group for enlarging and reinvigorating BWC stakeholdership is the new generation of life scientists. The history of biological weapons development in the 20th century underscores the central role played by scientists. It was scientists who established and politically drove the offensive programmes of the past, and it was scientists who weaponised pathogens in the lab, grew them up in fermenters and optimised their delivery. But it was also scientists who spoke out against what they saw as the misuse of their science. Scientists acted as political advisors, technical experts and advocates in the formation of the BWC. There is now a need to reinvigorate the role of scientists in contemporary security discussions about biological weapons. Scientists themselves are the ones who can most effectively instil a sensibility in their colleagues toward dual-use science and foster a responsibility for ensuring that their experiments and research are not misused. It is they who have the technical expertise required to make sure the red lines laid down by the international community against the misuse of biology are not being crossed – intentionally or inadvertently – in the lab. It is also scientists who have the best access and who can most effectively reach, engage and energise their own community in the security issues surrounding their science, and who can thereby most effectively champion the goals of the BWC. Finally, it is scientists who can inject urgency into the political discussions by drawing attention to advances in their fields and to their implications for biological weapons development. It is only by actively incorporating the scientific community in civil society engagement with the BWC that the treaty will remain relevant and effective as the principal forum for discussing security developments in the life sciences in the 21st century.

Workshop objective

On 3 December 2017, the Geneva Disarmament Platform and King's College London organised a workshop on 'Civil society and the BWC: Finding a way forward' at the Hotel N'vy in Geneva, Switzerland. It took place following the failure of the Eighth Review Conference to agree an on-going work programme, and in the days leading up to the 2017 BWC Meeting of States Parties (MSP).

The workshop formed part of the on-going series of deliberations on the current and future roles of civil society in relation to the BWC, and aimed to build on these previous discussions. Limited to a small group of active BWC civil society stakeholders, the workshop focused on (1) current political, diplomatic and scientific developments, (2) civil society engagement with the BWC, and (3) the potential for building an effective civil society coalition, with particular emphasis on how to engage the younger generation of life scientists.

The workshop was generously funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Geneva Disarmament Platform.

Participation

Sixteen arms control and biosecurity experts, academics and representatives from civil society organisations attended the meeting. A detailed participant list is provided in Appendix 1. The participants were generally selected on the basis of their experience in the field of biological arms control and on their engagement with the BWC, but some new voices and perspectives were also brought in.

Format

The meeting took place under the Chatham House rule and consisted primarily of moderated roundtable discussions. Short kick off presentations were provided by Nick Evans (University of Massachusetts Lowell) and Gunnar Jeremias (University of Hamburg) for session 2, and by Jo Husbands (US National Academy of Sciences) and Piers Millett (Biosecu.re) for session 3. The programme was chaired by Richard Lennane (Geneva Disarmament Platform) and Filippa Lentzos (King's College London).

Summary of discussions

The first session appraised the current situation both within the BWC community and outside. It focused primarily on recent political, diplomatic and scientific developments, and how they shape the roles of civil society. Key topics discussed included:

- Political manoeuvring by states and individuals in the run up to the 2017 MSP
- Relevant meetings held in 2017, including the Hannover meeting in October, the Sochi meeting and G7 Rome meeting in November, and the US/Malaysia MSP pre-meeting in November/December
- The joint Russia, US, UK statement in advance of 2017 MSP
- Strong BWC community personalities: especially the MSP Chair, and the Iranian delegation
- Role of Russia's long arm in tempering Iran
- Emerging S&T and balance of incentives and disincentives: non-proliferation vs military attractiveness
- S&T becoming more distributed, increasing role for civil society in engaging scientists outside traditional institutions to build support for norms of BWC.

The second session considered possible roles for civil society, with and without an agreed programme of work in the current intersessional.

The 'expert, technical, quiet' character of traditional BWC civil society engagement was highlighted, and many emphasized the value of this. Others characterized the traditional engagement more as 'afraid to be pushed out of the room' and asked instead 'if nothing happens in the room, why is it important to be in the room?'

It was noted that characterising the group as **the** civil society is problematic. 'Where does our legitimacy come from? We are not elected.' Many in civil society are representatives of universities, coming out of a long history of CBW engagement (Meselson, Perry-Robinson, Hay, Pearson, Dando), but a number of civil society actors are not. Some actors see themselves primarily as observers, without claiming a political agenda; others come from institutions with clear political agendas.

BWC civil society actors are in many ways heterogeneous, but, at the same time, also homogenous. The vast majority are white, Western, and from the global north. This can lead, for instance, to framing the engagement discussion in a particular way. Outreach is needed.

Examples of useful civil society activities include: awareness-raising and education, communication (e.g. BWC daily reports), encouraging responsible behaviour, initiating codes of conduct, (re)developing life scientist pledges, analysing biodefence activities and scientific advances, new thinking and ideas, alternate framings, pushing governments further, partnering with governments, engaging both inside and outside the BWC, replacing activities usually done by states (e.g. fostering S&T process, hosting alternative MX), bridge-building between relevant communities and networks, hosting symposia, shaping the next generation.

Many aspects of the discussion in this session overlapped with themes in the third session: developing an effective coalition. Others have identified successful coalition recipes: membership, common goal or call for change, leadership, common plan, collective identity – ‘most of which we don’t have.’

Various BWC-related coalitions were discussed, including Pugwash, the BioWeapons Prevention Project (BWPP), and the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA).

One participant found the debate on finding a common voice reminiscent of that in the GHSA consortium. Last year progress was made, with a mission statement, website, panel meeting, and events in different parts of the world developed and run by consortium. It is run by founding members, and funded by organisational dues.

Some thought a loose international coalition of colleagues would be better than a traditional coalition.

Some were convinced coalition-building was not what the group was trying to do. It could lead to the lowest common denominator. There is also a cost to the approach: Funds are invested in infrastructure rather than activities. Community-building was thought a better model: a group of like-minded people, working better together, with the overall aim of reducing biothreats. By engaging others, you build a larger community. It’s a more effective process, more inclusive and flexible, while clearly still needing individuals to get the whole thing going. Community-building is action-oriented rather than institution-building.

Others thought alliances for specific purposes could be useful, for instance to bring in young scientists and engage the next generation. Some termed them ‘communities of convenience’. iGEM was highlighted as an example of one important network for the BWC NGO community with 600 young scientists every year; 35,000 alumni to date. Huge potential for addressing the white, Western, global north composition: now more Chinese iGEM teams than in whole of Europe, and in US. Other networks that can be tapped into were highlighted, for example: GHSA next generation network; the Young Scientist Network; the Global Young Academy; Emerging Leaders in Biosecurity (ELBI, which is both a multigenerational and multi-sectoral network); Synthetic Biology Leadership Excellence Accelerator Program (LEAP). Networks around the sustainable development goals (SDGs) were also thought useful, particularly as a hook outside the US and Western Europe.

Reflecting on effective advocacy campaigns for humanitarian disarmament, it was noted that they often coalesced around the affected community, the human element, both victims and survivors. The BWC doesn’t have victims; its ‘affected’ community is scientists.

The experience of Wildfire was drawn on—a campaign which deliberately used confrontation as a way to grab people’s attention. People take more notice, if you attack them, or attack someone else. They often react with hostility, but sometimes that’s worth it. Someone made the point that Wildfire was so extreme, it made the rest of ICAN look reasonable. Different roles and functions can be played even within a coalition.

It was remarked that “Coalitions need something visible and obvious to get involved in. They need an identity; something to belong to. In ICAN there was always plenty of squabbling, but there was a larger common goal. A coalition needs some sort of entity. There doesn’t need to be a detailed plan; at first it could be just a label.”

Different identities were considered; ‘Biothreat reduction network’ was one that drew considerable support.

The importance of messaging was highlighted. A particularly good framing was thought to be around the responsible conduct of science; it was acknowledged that more than one framing can be relevant to engaging different groups. Scientists are already connected globally, and existing networks could be piggy-backed on. It was important not to make Geneva the sole focus. In building a global base, it could be useful to look for regional opportunities. ASEAN, for instance, has a biosecurity plan.

There was a need for easy, cost-effective ways to spread the word: suggestions included a common set of slides, and a Twitter hashtag.

A question was asked about the extent to which the BWC NGO community should frame itself within larger multilateral action on, for instance, concern about eroding disarmament generally and general advances in science and technology. Some felt strongly the BWC piece of the network must be defended, and rather than going too broad, it would be better to bring together others thinking the same.

Conclusions

The BWC NGO community is simultaneously heterogeneous and homogenous. Its members approach the treaty with different backgrounds, affiliations, agendas and strategies. At the same time, the majority of members are white, Western and from the global north. A clear point coming out of the workshop was that the community needs a more global base and a focus on the younger generation of life scientists.

Consistent, unified messaging was highlighted as important for successfully grouping civil society stakeholders. Biothreat reduction and responsible science were considered particularly good frames.

Various groupings were considered as part of the discussion: coalitions, alliances, networks, communities. While different views were expressed on the value of coalitions, towards the end of the discussion many seemed to agree that BWC civil society actors would benefit from two types of groupings: Loose, broad network alliances and a tighter, action-oriented BWC-focused community.

Appendix 1: Participant List

Nancy Connell	Rutgers University; US National Academy of Sciences
Nick Evans	University of Massachusetts Lowell, ELBI Fellow Class of 2015
Mary-Margaret Fill	Johns Hopkins University; ELBI Fellow Class of 2017
Richard Guthrie	Independent
Jo Husbands	US National Academy of Sciences; InterAcademy Partnership
Kai Ilchmann	Independent
Gunnar Jeremias	University of Hamburg
Richard Lennane	Geneva Disarmament Platform
Filippa Lentzos	King's College London
Marion Loddo	Geneva Disarmament Platform
Bob Mathews	University of Melbourne
Kathryn Millett	Biosecu.re
Piers Millett	Biosecu.re
Michelle Nalabandian	Nuclear Threat Initiative; ELBI Fellow Class of 2015
Saskia Popescu	George Mason University; ELBI Fellow Class of 2015
Matthew Shearer	Johns Hopkins University

Appendix 2: Agenda

3 December 2017
Hotel N'vy, Geneva

- 10:30 Welcome and introduction
- 11:00 Session 1: Appraising the current situation
One year after a disappointing review conference, what is happening within the BWC community and outside? What developments – political, diplomatic or scientific – do we need to take into account in shaping an effective role for civil society? Who are the key actors, and what are their primary interests?
- 12:30 Lunch
- 13:30 Session 2: Developing a plan of engagement
What role do we want civil society play in contributing to the effective implementation of the BWC? Is there scope for acting in the event that BWC States Parties do not agree on an intersessional work program? What is needed, and who should be involved? What resources are required, and how can they be obtained?
- 15:00 Coffee
- 15:20 Session 3: Developing an effective coalition
How can we build an effective coalition? What strategies are needed to engage the younger generation of scientists and biotechnologists? How wide should we cast the net? How should the coalition be structured and managed? How can we ensure inclusion of people from developing countries?
- 16:50 Conclusion and next steps
- 17:00 Close