

**Building a Civil Society Coalition to Strengthen the  
Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)  
Geneva, Switzerland  
10-11 December 2015**

## **Workshop Report**



### **Summary**

- 33 participants from a wide variety of civil society organizations, research institutions, international organizations and a selected group of states.
- Primarily policy-focused meeting, with discussions on the important role that civil society plays in upholding and strengthening the BWC and the norm against the use of these weapons.
- 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 and action-oriented direction. Actors within the biological weapons control community are open to the 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.
- More work needs to be done to provide a clearer rationale and objective for civil society and to develop an action-focused, young community in the context of the BWC.

## **Background**

On 11-12 December 2015, [Chatham House](#), [King's College London](#) (KCL), [International Law and Policy Institute](#) (ILPI) and [Geneva Centre for Security Policy](#) (GCSP) organised a workshop on building a global civil society coalition to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) at the Starling Hotel and Conference Center in Geneva, Switzerland. It took place in the days leading up to the last BWC Meeting of States Parties (MSP) before the 2016 Review Conference of the BWC. The workshop was generously funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and ILPI.

## **Workshop objective**

The meeting aimed to strengthen and support the BWC by initiating discussions on:

- (1) the potential for an enhanced role and contribution of civil society organizations to the 2016 Eighth Review Conference and to the BWC more generally,
- (2) ways in which civil society actors can collectively organise more effectively to maximise their contributions and advance a shared agenda, and
- (3) next steps and strategies to mobilise resources.

## **Participation**

33 representatives from a wide variety of civil society organizations, research institutions, international organizations and a select group of states attended the meeting. While the majority of participants had previously worked within the field of biological weapons, for many of the participants this workshop was their first exposure to the issue.

## **Format**

The meeting took place under the Chatham House rule and consisted of a combination of presentations, moderated round table discussions, and smaller breakout groups.

## **Summary of discussions**

Participants highlighted that civil society has an important role to play to uphold the norm against the weaponization of disease and to ensure the fulfillment of the aims of the BWC. Several participants also expressed the view that civil society has contributed to some of the most important achievements in disarmament in recent years, and that civil society has a special role to play in holding States Parties accountable to the public. However, civil society is not organizing as efficiently in the field of biological weapons as in other disarmament and arms control fields. It was also acknowledged that civil society engagement in the field of biological weapons is marked by significantly less enthusiasm and energy than in related fields, where civil society has taken on a more active role.

The workshop began by going through some of the civil society developments in the field of biological weapons since negotiations on a BWC Protocol broke down in 2001. Many participants referred to the [Biological Weapons Prevention Project](#) (BWPP) and the BioWeapons Report (later [BioWeapons Monitor](#))—both established as a response to the failed efforts to strengthen the BWC through a legally binding

protocol. It was pointed out that the enthusiasm generated during the first years of the BWPP had since been waning, and that the future direction of the BWPP is currently unclear. Several participants pointed to the absence of a clear rationale and actionable objectives as the main reason for this loss of momentum, while other participants pointed to other factors, such as lack of funding, leadership and vision.

The subsequent sessions looked at how civil society had organized themselves in other fields, and aimed to identify experiences and lessons learned for how civil society can successfully make an impact in the field of biological weapons. Civil society engagement with other arms and disarmament issues, including nuclear weapons, anti-personnel landmines, cluster munitions and autonomous weapons could provide useful models for the field of biological weapons. According to one analysis, successful civil society campaign coalitions have five core characteristics: (1) A common call for change; (2) a common identity; (3) a membership; (4) a leadership; and (5) a common plan or strategy. The relatively young age of people involved in these campaigns, as compared with most civil society actors currently engaged in the field of biological weapons, was noted.

While some workshop participants were worried about the potentially adverse effects of turning complex and technical issues into simple campaign messages, others argued that at least some international campaign coalitions had in fact built upon and therefore managed to reinforce the perspectives of scientific and technical experts. It was pointed out that the most successful campaign coalitions were those that managed to challenge and change the dominant discourse by introducing new evidence demonstrating the unacceptable nature of the weapons in question. In this context, the [Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity](#) (BWH) project of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) provided an attempt at changing the predominantly security-based BWC discourse.

### **Suggested action points**

The breakout groups and final sessions aimed to identify practical action points for civil society in order to strengthen/uphold the norm against biological weapons in the run-up to the 2016 Review Conference of the BWC. The suggestions included:

- Establish a new civil society coalition in the biological weapons field. Participants suggested a number of advocacy/public outreach objectives for such a coalition, including (1) increase transparency in biodefense; (2) full participation for civil society in the meetings of the BWC; (3) a mechanism to investigate violations of the BWC; (4) an expanded BWC Implementation Support Unit; (5) education and awareness raising; (6) engagement of the scientific community through the motto “no scientist left behind”.
- Build upon and expand the BioWeapons Monitor produced by BWPP since 2010. Several participants called for more advocacy-oriented monitoring with, for example, public ratings of states’ compliance with the BWC and an updated biological weapons risk analysis.
- Design and initiate a process amongst interested and relevant civil society actors to arrive at a common call for change in the field of biological weapons and a common set of criteria for success at the 2016 Review Conference of the

BWC. Participants suggested a number of ways such a process could be designed.

- Intensify civil society fundraising efforts in the run-up to the 2016 Review Conference of the BWC. Participants considered a number of potential donors, including states, foundations and industry actors.

## **Conclusions**

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. It also showed that actors within the biological weapons community are open to the ideas and suggestions of actors from other fields, and that actors not previously exposed to this issue can be interested in further engaging with the issue of biological weapons. Most importantly, the discussions at the workshop indicated that it is both possible and desirable to contribute to the establishment of a new global civil society coalition in the field of biological weapons.