

Online Discussion on Biosafety: Summary Report

Food and agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD)

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

The FAO/CBD/OECD Biosafety Databases Forum

Challenges and experiences in establishing and maintaining inter-agency communication on biosafety-related issues

27 April – 10 May 2015

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In preparation of a joint FAO/CBD/OECD Webinar that addresses good practices for national communication and coordination mechanisms to be held on 27 May 2015 (<http://www.fao.org/food/food-safety-quality/a-z-index/biotechnology/biosafety-events/>), an online discussion was convened where the focal/contact points of the three organizations could share their experiences and perspectives. This report summarizes the contributions that were made during the online discussion to improve the content of the upcoming webinar.

1.2 Objective

The objective of the online discussion is to provide a forum on which countries can share experiences, good practices and challenges in establishing effective national communication and coordination mechanisms on the topic of biosafety.

1.3 Organizers

The online discussion was jointly convened by Masami Takeuchi (FAO), Ward Hermans (FAO), Manoela Miranda (CBD), Dina Abdelhakim (CBD), Peter Kearns (OECD), Bertrand Dagallier (OECD) and Takahiko Nikaido (OECD).

1.4 Participation and practicalities

A total of 327 persons registered to participate in this discussion that was hosted by CBD at http://bch.cbd.int/onlineconferences/portal_art20/fao-cbd-oecd/discussion/

Participants posted comments between 27 April 2015 and 10 May 2015 and in total 50 contributions from 33 different countries were made. From the total number of contributions 9 responses came from Africa (18%), 11 (22%) from Asia and the Pacific, 1 (2%) from North America and the South West Pacific, 8 (16%) from the Near East, 8 (16%) from Latin America and the Caribbean, 9 (18%) from Europe and 4 (8%) from international organizations.

2 The need for coordination and communication mechanisms

The need to establish an inter-sectoral communication mechanism among the various involved authorities was recognized by many of the participants. It was mentioned that since biosafety is a multidisciplinary topic it requires efforts to achieve coordinated action of all relevant regulatory agencies. Mechanisms that facilitate the functional coordination was therefore seen as an important need as it can clarify the role of the involved institutions and avoid duplication of work.

2.1 Existing formal cross-sectoral mechanisms

Many countries have in place a formal cross-sectoral body (e.g. National Biosafety Committee) that is composed of regulatory agencies or ministries from various sectors. Examples were named by Cambodia, Niger, Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Mauritius, Malaysia, Zimbabwe, Iran, Madagascar, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Lebanon, Japan, Belarus, LAO PDR, Belgium, the Philippines, Spain, Uganda, Turkey, Egypt, Ghana and Korea. In addition Bhutan proposed a cross-sectoral mechanism to be established in the draft bill that is currently awaiting approval of the parliament.

Agencies that were mentioned to be included were active in various sectors including Agriculture, Health, Environment, Trade, Finance, Science and Technology and Industry. Some countries also report that in these cross-sectoral bodies non-governmental stakeholders such as civil society, NGOs and consumer associations are included. The committees that were mentioned by countries are often established in accordance with a mandate that is provided by national law.

2.2 Role of formal cross-sectoral bodies

Despite the fact that most countries report some form of a cross-sectoral body, the tasks that are assigned to such entities vary among countries.

Regulatory responsibilities

Some countries have established a cross-sectoral body that makes regulatory decisions on GM applications. Zimbabwe, reported that since biotechnology and biosafety issues are considered highly cross-sectoral, a National Biotechnology Authority has been established that is designated as competent authority. Turkey mentioned to have established a Biosafety Board that decides on applications and thereby takes into account the advice of a risk assessment and socio-economic committee. Spain and Germany indicated that their national biosafety committees are authorized for giving approval for the use of GM organisms in research and field trials.

Provision of scientific advice

Other countries reported the establishment of cross-sectoral advisory committees. In Ghana a technical advisory body (TAC) has been established in which experts of the various agencies that conduct risk assessment convene to develop a scientific review report. This report is submitted to the national competent authority that is responsible for making the regulatory decisions. In Japan a biosafety advisory committee has been established in which various experts convene to provide scientific opinions on environmental risk assessment. Spain has a National Commission on Biosafety that is comprised of scientific experts and is responsible for doing risk assessment. The scientific reviews are used to advise the competent authority and decision makers on the EU level. Uganda has established the Uganda Biosafety and Biotechnology Consortium in which relevant experts from

various agencies convene and that aims to provide policymakers with all required information to understand the topic and to create awareness to policymakers on GMO related issues.

Coordination and information sharing

Most cross-sectoral bodies that have been reported are responsible for coordination and sharing information among the various involved agencies, ministries and institutes. Some countries reported a mechanism that facilitates the functional coordination among the various involved agencies (Mauritius, Cuba, Belgium, Mexico and Iran). Some participants also specifically mentioned that these bodies are responsible for harmonizing and improving regulations procedures and setting standards (Philippines, Cuba and LAO PDR). It was also indicated by various countries that the formed mechanisms aim to collect, store and disseminate data and information on biosafety and GMOs (Malaysia, Japan). Some participants also explicitly mentioned the importance of their national Biosafety Clearing House plays by collecting and sharing information (Moldova, South Korea).

2.3 Informal Communication Mechanisms

Canada informed that when products are assessed by multiple agencies simultaneously a monthly informal teleconference is held to update each other on the status of the assessment. Also Japan stated that communication among the different safety sectors (environment and food safety) relies heavily on informal networks.

3 Challenges in achieving effective communication

Establishing and effective framework

Some countries indicated that their biosafety regulatory framework is still under development or is waiting for approval by the parliament and therefore no coordination mechanisms have been established yet (Bhutan, Rwanda). Other countries indicated that several national institutes have been assigned functions on biosafety issues, but that no communication mechanism has yet been installed (Kazakhstan). It was also stated that clearly identifying the roles and responsibilities is considered a challenge (Malaysia, LAO PDR). It was reported by Japan that although there are coordination mechanisms in place between ministries related to biosafety, no formal mechanism exist through which agencies responsible for different safety aspects (e.g. environmental and food safety) interact.

Raising awareness

Some participants stated that a lack of awareness among stakeholders, policymakers and the general public on the importance of the biosafety is a challenge (Malaysia, Zimbabwe and Uganda). This lack of awareness can result in insufficient resource allocation to biosafety. Various participants indicated the need to implement biotechnology and biosafety in the national educational system to increase awareness (Zimbabwe, Iran).

Resource limitations

Various countries indicated that human and material resources are limited. Some countries indicated that biosafety is a relatively new area for many of its institutions and that experience in performing a risk assessment is limited (Belarus, LAO PDR). The Philippines reported that implementing the National Biosafety Framework is a challenge since no annual financial resources

are provided. This results in insufficient full-time scientific staff that is fully aware of emerging trends. Also Slovenia indicated that a scarcity in resources impedes proper coordination and timely response. Some participants specifically stated a need for more capacity for the identification and detection of GMOs. This would require more laboratory facilities and training for staff (Zimbabwe, Iran, Niger).

Streamlining biosafety policies with other national policies

Zimbabwe indicated that the mainstreaming of the biosafety policy with sectoral policies and national biodiversity strategic plans is a challenge. Also Madagascar raised this challenge and mentioned that its National Biosafety Committee has insufficient impact on the definition and conduct of sectoral policies. It has been observed that these policies sometimes do not recognize the national biosafety policies and this leads to uncoordinated action of regulatory authorities. Pakistan reported that addressing the Cartagena Protocol in its National Biosafety Policy remains a challenge since it the knowledge on the protocol is limited.

Transparency

Some countries mentioned challenges in achieving transparency and data availability. Moldova mentioned that a limiting factor was that some academic institutions do not share their information with regulatory agencies and/or the public. Iran mentioned that is needs to further improve is national Biosafety Clearing House to facilitate information sharing among stakeholders.

4 Role of international organizations

Databases

The maintenance of the databases was considered a useful effort since they provide a public resource where all regulatory decisions and assessments are centralized. However, some countries emphasized the importance of further streamlining the data requirement of the databases (Belgium, Spain and Slovenia).

Training and Capacity Building

Several countries indicated that harmonized guidance, specific trainings, webinars or workshops at the national or regional level could be useful. These efforts could aim to enhance countries' capacities in doing risk assessment and to promote interagency collaboration (Kazakhstan, Moldova, LAO PDR Uganda, Bhutan, Iran and Turkey). One participant from Mauritius specifically asked for further guidance on how to streamline biosafety policies with other national policies. The Philippines specifically mentioned the usefulness of consensus documents that are developed by OECD as they are relevant to the work of multiple of the involved agencies.

Facilitating Communication Channels

It was also stated that the facilitation of communication channels by the organizations could be a useful effort. Japan specifically indicated that if the international organizations could develop a list with all contact points of different databases within one country this could improve inter-sectoral communication and coordination thus efficiency in their national activities.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

The online discussion achieved to have many participants from various parts of the world exchanging their experiences on national communication and coordination mechanisms in the area of biosafety. The results will be used as a basis for the upcoming webinar. It is recommended for FAO/CBD/OECD to follow up on all suggestions and needs to consider future joint webinars and/or any other joint activities.

6 Relevant websites

- FAO GM Foods Platform: <http://fao.org/gm-platform>
- Biosafety Clearing House (BCH): <https://bch.cbd.int/>
- OECD BioTrack Product Database: <http://www2.oecd.org/biotech/default.aspx>