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COORDINATION MEETING FOR GOVERNMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS IMPLEMENTING OR FUNDING BIOSAFETY CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Montreal, Canada

26 to 27 January 2005

Agenda item 3.1 of the provisional agenda *

INTERIM PROGRESS REPORT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COORDINATION MECHANISM

Note by the Executive Secretary

1. INTRODUCTION

1. In its decision BS-I/5 on capacity-building, the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety Protocol, adopted a Coordination Mechanism to facilitate the exchange of information with a view to promoting partnerships and maximizing complementarities and synergies between various initiatives undertaken to implement the Action Plan for Building Capacities for the Effective Implementation of the Protocol. The Coordination Mechanism consists of, *inter alia*, five complementary elements, namely: (i) a liaison group on capacity-building for biosafety; (ii) biosafety capacity-building databases; (iii) an information-sharing and networking mechanism, consisting of two components namely: the biosafety information resource centre and a biosafety capacity-building network; (iv) coordination meetings and workshops; and (v) a reporting mechanism.

2. In paragraphs 19 to 23 of decision BS-I/5, Parties, other Governments and relevant organizations were invited to participate actively in the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism, including through providing information on their biosafety capacity-building activities and sharing of their expertise and resource materials through the Coordination Mechanism. They were also invited to provide financial and other support to facilitate the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism. Furthermore, they were encouraged to establish or strengthen, as appropriate, corresponding national or regional-level coordination mechanisms in order to promote synergies between existing capacity-building initiatives.

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3. In the same decision, the Executive Secretary was requested to discharge a number of functions, in a phased manner and within existing resources, to facilitate implementation of the Coordination Mechanism, including: maintaining the capacity-building databases; convening and servicing meetings of the liaison group; and organizing, subject to availability of funding, periodic coordination meetings. The Executive Secretary was also requested to prepare a report on the progress made, and the lessons learned, in implementing the Coordination Mechanism for consideration by the second meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol.

4. The present note provides a progress report on the implementation of the different elements of the Coordination Mechanism, including the initial lessons learned and the limitations and challenges encountered. Participants may wish to contribute additional input based on their experience in using the Coordination Mechanism, including any difficulties encountered, for integration into the final report that will be submitted for consideration by the second meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of Parties to the Protocol.

2. PROGRESS WITH THE ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN TO IMPLEMENT THE COORDINATION MECHANISM

5. Following the adoption of the Coordination Mechanism by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of Parties to the Protocol, a number of activities were undertaken to facilitate its implementation. In the initial phase, emphasis was placed on developing the capacity-building databases and on organizing meetings of the liaison group as well as Coordination Meetings (see paragraphs 15 and 16). Preliminary work has also been done on establishing, within the Biosafety Clearing-House, a portal for the Biosafety Information Resource Centre and the platform for e-mail listservs or discussion forums, which might serve as basis for developing the hub for the Biosafety Capacity-Building Network. Implementation of the reporting mechanism has not yet started. In order to inform the public about the Coordination Mechanism, its activities and outputs, a Web page on the Coordination Mechanism has been established on the Convention website.¹

6. The following sub-sections provide a brief status report on the development and implementation of each of the above-mentioned elements and the experiences gained.

(a) Capacity-building databases

7. There has been considerable progress with regard to the development and implementation of the capacity-building databases. The Secretariat has fully developed three searchable capacity-building databases in the Biosafety Clearing-House for projects, opportunities and for country needs and priorities.² Common formats and controlled vocabularies have been developed for each of databases to facilitate submission of information in a consistent manner and to facilitate customized searching of the databases in all the six UN languages. Records can now be registered and updated directly online by designated persons in the institutions owning the records through a password system. The design of the databases allows attachment of document and inclusion of links to other websites providing more detailed information.

8. In order to enhance timely access to new information recorded in the databases, a listserv, referred to as the "BCH Current Awareness Service has been established to send bi-weekly notifications to subscribed users about new and updated records in the Biosafety Clearing-House.

¹ The web page can be accessed at: <http://www.biodiv.org/biosafety/issues/coordination.aspx>

² The capacity-building databases are accessible at: <http://bch.biodiv.org/capacitybuilding>

Stakeholders who are interested in receiving regular updates can subscribe to this listserv at the following web link: <http://bch.biodiv.org/member/maillinglist.shtml>.

9. As of 15 December 2004, the capacity-building projects database contained a total of 108 records, of which 74 were ongoing projects and 34 were completed and archived. Each record specifies the title of the activity, the name and type of the lead organization and the other partners, the timeframe, the geographic coverage, the elements of the capacity-building Action Plan to which the work contributes, the objectives and specific activities undertaken, the source and amount of funding, a brief description of the project and the contact details for further information.

10. As of 15 December 2004, the capacity-building opportunities database contained 54 records of which 29 were still available. Each record specifies the title and type of opportunity (e.g. scholarship or funding grant), the name and type of organization offering it, the timeframe, the eligibility criteria, the elements of the Action Plan to which the work contributes, the scope and level of support, the application process, a brief description of the opportunity and the contact details for further information. The database has been designed in such a way that the records are archived automatically once the specified timeframe of availability expires.

11. As of 15 December 2004, the country needs and priorities database contained 49 records based on information submitted by developing countries and countries with economies in transition. A common format was developed and incorporated in the management centre of the Biosafety Clearing-House to enable countries to register the information directly online in a consistent manner, which in turn would facilitate easy searching of the database and overall analysis of the needs from different countries.

12. There are plans to establish a new capacity-building database for the compendium of existing biosafety training and education courses offered by academic institutions and other training organizations. The Government of Switzerland made a formal request in this regard following the recommendation by the Coordination Meeting of institutions offering biosafety-related training and education programs, which was held 4-6 October 2004 in Geneva, Switzerland.

(b) Information Sharing and Networking Mechanism

13. The information-sharing and networking mechanism provides electronic tools and arrangements for improving access to, and exchange of, relevant biosafety information and resource materials by various users and facilitating interaction between individuals interested or involved in biosafety capacity-building activities. It consists of two components namely: the biosafety information resource centre; and a biosafety capacity-building network.

14. During the initial phase, preliminary work was done on establishing the Biosafety Information Resource Centre. A format for the Biosafety Information Resource Centre was developed and is being incorporated in the BCH. The Biosafety Clearing-House Informal Advisory Committee (BCH-IAC), which met in Montreal from 9 to 10 November 2004, recommended that the design of the Biosafety Information Resource Centre should allow for clear identification of the source of the information in order to distinguish between information provided by governments in accordance with Protocol obligations, and other general scientific, technical, environmental and legal information and resource materials from other relevant organizations.

15. The next phase will include finalization of the Biosafety Information Resource Centre and operationalization of the Biosafety Capacity-Building Network, including development of its hub within the Biosafety Clearing-House and facilitation of e-mail listservs or discussion forums, as

appropriate.³ It is expected that the present Coordination Meeting will discuss and provide suggestions on possible concrete steps to operationalize the Network. The outcomes of the discussions will be used in further developing measures to implement this element.

(c) Liaison Group on Capacity-Building for Biosafety

16. The first formal meeting of the Liaison Group after the adoption of the Coordination Mechanism by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of Parties to the Protocol will be held 27-28 January 2005 in Montreal, Canada. Twenty-three participants from government institutions and relevant United Nations and other international organizations were invited. The meeting will consider its terms of reference and modalities of operation, review and provide advice on implementation of the Coordination Mechanism and discuss measures to enhance the coordination and implementation of the capacity-building Action Plan. The meeting is also expected to provide advice on the draft terms of reference that will guide the process leading up to the comprehensive review and possible revision of the Action Plan by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of Parties to the Protocol at its third meeting. It is expected that the terms of reference will be considered and adopted by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of Parties to the Protocol at its second meeting.

(d) Coordination Meetings

17. Since the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol, two coordination meetings have been organized within the context of the Coordination Mechanism. The first was for academic and other institutions offering biosafety-related education and training programmes, which was held from 4-6 October 2004 in Geneva, Switzerland. It was sponsored, organized and hosted by the Swiss Agency for Environment, Forests and Landscape (SAEFL) in collaboration with the CBD Secretariat, the UNEP/GEF Biosafety Unit and the Geneva Environment Network. A total of 37 participants from 28 institutions involved in biosafety training and education attended the meeting. The main outcome of the meeting was the development of a common format for the compendium of existing biosafety training and education programs. The meeting recommended that the compendium should be made available online through a searchable database in the Biosafety Clearing-House. By the end of October 2004, information has been submitted for 31 training programs, which will be registered in the compendium database. The meeting also produced a number of recommendations, which will be forwarded by the Government of Switzerland to the second meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol and to other relevant stakeholders. A copy of the full report of the meeting is available as information document UNEP/CBD/BS/CM-CB/1/INF/3.

18. The present Coordination Meeting for Governments and organizations implementing or funding biosafety-related capacity building activities was also organized as part of implementing the Coordination Mechanism. A total of 55 participants were invited to attend. The main objective of this first meeting is to bring together representatives of different relevant institutions to share information on “who is doing what and where” and hold initial discussions on ways and means of enhancing coordination and cooperation among them. Among other things, the participants at the meeting are expected to consider the report on the needs and priorities of countries and discuss possible ways of address them in their capacity-building assistance programmes. It will also discuss the scope and modus operandi for future meetings and consider options for operationalizing the Biosafety Capacity-Building Network.

³ See: <http://beh.biodiv.org/capacitybuilding/informationsharing/default.shtml>

3. EXPERIENCE GAINED, LESSONS LEARNED AND CONSTRAINTS ENCOUNTERED

19. Overall, significant progress has been made in implementing the Coordination Mechanism and a growing number of relevant players have expressed interest in participating. The demand for information in capacity-building databases, for example, has grown steadily over the last year, according to the database statistics and website analytics. A user survey undertaken by the Secretariat during August and September 2004 showed that out of all the types of information available in the Biosafety Clearing-House, a large number of users (64%) are most interested in accessing information on capacity-building activities. Forty-eight percent of the users reported that they specially use the Biosafety Clearing-House to learn about available capacity-building activities.

Experience and Lessons Learned

20. The use of “common formats” and “controlled vocabulary” has been very helpful in facilitating easy registration and searching for information in the capacity-building databases. For example, the questionnaire (common format) enabled respondents to identify and submit in a consistent manner their specific needs under the broad areas for capacity-building identified in the Action Plan.

21. Successful implementation of the Coordination Mechanism will require sustained interest and commitment of key relevant players. The benefits for partners in participating in the Coordination Mechanism, for example sharing their information through the databases in the Biosafety Clearing-House, also need to be clearly spelt out and explained.

22. Coordination and cooperation with other initiatives requires investment of resources, including time and money. Some participating organizations may be reluctant to divert the limited available resources from other pressing priorities and invest them in the coordination efforts unless there are net bona fide benefits. Therefore, for the Coordination Mechanism to be successful, it should produce recognizable benefits and added-value. Furthermore, participation in the Coordination Mechanism should place as little resource demands as possible on the participating organizations.

Limitations and challenges

23. A number of constraints and challenges have been encountered in the initial process of implementing the Coordination Mechanism. The main challenges included the following:

(a) *Limited submission and sharing of information:* While there has been considerable effort made to populate the capacity-building databases, overall the provision of information is poor. There are many ongoing capacity-building projects that have not been registered and some of the projects in the database were recorded long after they had started. On the other hand, many countries have not yet submitted information on their capacity-building needs. So far only 49 countries have done so. This lack of adequate information in the system makes it difficult to come up with meaningful analysis of the situation. There is a need to devise ways of encouraging proactive submission of information and in a timely manner.

(b) *Poor rate of updating of information in the capacity-building databases:* The usefulness of the capacity-building databases depends on the punctuality and reliability of the information therein. The information needs to be provided in timely manner and up-to-dated regularly. Unfortunately, a number of records in the database are not updated regularly by the owners to reflect the current status. Some of the records have not been updated in a very long time despite

reminders by the Secretariat to the owners of the records. There is a need to develop mechanisms to ensure regular update of the records.

(c) *Limited participation in the Coordination Mechanism by relevant institutions:* Many potential players have not yet participated in the Coordination Mechanism. One of the reasons is probably because they are still unaware about it and how it works. The other reason is probably because some of them are still skeptical about its potential value for them. There is a need to broaden participation of all key organizations involved in implementing biosafety capacity-building initiatives. Key players should be identified and encouraged to participate. Also, there is need to enhance the visibility of the Coordination Mechanism and its outputs and impact.

(d) *Lack of quality control mechanisms:* The reliability of the information in the capacity-building databases is very important in order to ensure the credibility and usefulness of the Coordination mechanism. However at the moment there is no effective mechanism for ensuring the accuracy and quality of the information shared through the Coordination Mechanism. This issue needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

(e) *Limited funding for coordination activities:* Currently there is no mechanism for financing activities of the Coordination Mechanism. There is a need to identify reliable sources of funding in order to be able to plan and implement the coordination and activities including organization of coordination meetings with some degree of certainty and predictability.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON FOLLOW-UP MEASURES

24. This note has provided a general progress report on the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism including the experiences gained and learned, as well as the limitations and challenges encountered.

25. There is a need to devise ways and means to solicit, encourage and facilitate participation of all relevant players in the Coordination Mechanism and support for its implementation, including measures to raise awareness about the Coordination Mechanism and potential benefits. Incentive mechanisms to encourage regular and timely sharing of information by governments and relevant organizations through the Coordination Mechanism are also needed.

26. Participants at this meeting may wish to:

(a) Review the information provided in the present note and provide views and suggestions for improvement;

(b) Share experiences and any difficulties encountered in using the Coordination Mechanism tools, for example the capacity-building databases, and propose any necessary improvements (e.g. comments on the common formats or the BCH management centre tools);

(c) Agree to provide or update information regarding their capacity-building initiatives before end of February 2005 in order to prepare a more up-to-date status report to MOP-2 on ongoing initiatives and the existing gaps;

(d) Identify other ongoing capacity-building initiatives which are not yet included in the Biosafety Clearing-House and invite/ encourage their coordinators to register them in the capacity-building databases;

(e) Suggest measures to encourage other governments and organizations involved in biosafety capacity-building to provide information regarding their activities to the Biosafety Clearing-House;

(f) Discuss and propose ways and means of encourage increased and systematic sharing of relevant information through the Coordination Mechanism, including possible incentive mechanisms to motivate governments and organizations to provide information to the Biosafety Clearing-House regarding their biosafety capacity-building activities;

(g) Discuss and propose possible quality control mechanisms to increase the accuracy and consistency of the information shared through the Coordination Mechanism (e.g. through the capacity-building databases and the Biosafety Information Resource Centre);

(h) Assist in formulating draft recommendations for consideration by the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of Parties to the Protocol.
