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AFRICAN REGIONAL MEETING ON THE BIOSAFETY
CLEARING-HOUSE AND THE CLEARING-HOUSE
MECHANISM
Nairobi, 26-28 February 2001

**REPORT OF THE AFRICAN REGIONAL MEETING ON THE BIOSAFETY
CLEARING-HOUSE AND THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM**

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

1. At its first meeting, held in Montpellier from 11 to 15 December 2000, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP), requested the Executive Secretary to analyse the identified capacity-building and financial requirements of the developing countries, in particular the least developed and small island developing States among them, and countries with economies in transition, as well as countries that are centres of origin and centres of genetic diversity, to enable their active participation in the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House.

2. The African Regional Meeting on the Biosafety Clearing-House and the Clearing-House Mechanism was held in Nairobi from 26 to 28 February 2001 in support of this objective, to provide countries of the region with an opportunity to express their needs and expectations with regard to the establishment of this pilot phase, keeping in mind the broader context of the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention.

3. This meeting was also intended to support decision V/14, annex II, item (d), of the Conference of the Parties, under which the Executive Secretary was requested to convene regional workshops to support capacity-building for clearing-house mechanism activities, training and awareness, so as to enable and further strengthen their participation and collaboration in the use and future development of the clearing-house mechanism.

B. Attendance

4. Each African country Party to the Convention was invited to nominate one participant, preferably qualified in the fields of management of biosafety-related issues (such as notifications for decision-making); information-sharing systems and database-management; and/or experience with the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention. In response to that invitation, participants from the following countries were nominated by their respective focal points and attended the meeting: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi,

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Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sudan, Swaziland, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe.

5. Representatives of the following bilateral donors and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations participated in the meeting as observers and/or resource persons:

(a) *Bilateral donors:* Belgium, Canada, Germany;

(b) *Intergovernmental organizations active in biosafety and/or information-exchange issues:* the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS), the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP);

(c) *Non-governmental organizations:* AfricaBio, Biowatch South Africa, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

6. A representative of the ICCP Bureau also participated in the meeting.

7. The full list of participants is contained in annex II to the present report.

ITEM 1. OPENING OF THE MEETING

8. The meeting began at 10 a.m. on Monday, 26 February 2001.

9. On behalf of the Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Ms. Cyrie Sendashonga, Senior Programme Officer in the Biosafety Unit of the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, welcomed the participants to the meeting. She gave a brief introduction to the Biosafety Clearing-House of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and pointed out its linkage with the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention. She said that the participants were expected to come up with a regional needs assessment by the end of the meeting. She recognized the presence of delegations of African countries and observers from United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, industry representatives, bilateral donor countries and the Bureau of ICCP. She then invited the Deputy Executive Director of UNEP, Mr. Shafqat Kakakhel, to address the meeting.

10. In his opening remarks on behalf of the Executive Director of UNEP, Mr. Kakakhel noted that the meeting provided the African region an opportunity to express its unique needs and experiences at a critical stage in the establishment of the pilot phase of the Biosafety Clearing-House (BCH), keeping in mind the broader context of the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention. He recalled that the Protocol had been developed as a legal framework that provided, *inter alia*, adequate safety measures and transparent procedures in the transboundary movements of living modified organisms (LMOs). He added that the Protocol was intended to make it possible for humanity to derive maximum benefits from the potential that biotechnology had to offer for mankind with minimum adverse effects on the environment, taking into account risks to human life.

11. He observed that the Convention itself, under Article 8(g), required countries to protect their biodiversity and environment against risks that might be posed by living modified organisms and to address the issue of biosafety. He observed further that if Africa had to make optimum use of modern biotechnology, individual countries, regions and subregions would need to create homegrown scientific and technological expertise and institutions with an adequate biosafety regulatory capacity.

ITEM 2. ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

2.1. Election of officers

12. At 1st session of the meeting, on 26 February, Mr. Tewolde B.G. Egziabher of Ethiopia was elected to serve as Chair and Ms. Mary Fosi Mbantenkhu of Cameroon to serve as Rapporteur.

2.2. Adoption of agenda

13. The Regional Meeting adopted the following agenda on the basis of the provisional agenda proposed in document UNEP/CBD/BCH/Afr.Reg/1/1:

1. Opening of the meeting.
2. Organizational matters:
 - 2.1. Election of officers;
 - 2.2. Adoption of the agenda;
 - 2.3. Organization of work.
3. Issues for in-depth consideration:
 - 3.1. Information exchange under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety;
 - 3.2. Existing biodiversity and biosafety information-exchange mechanisms in Africa;
 - 3.3. Building capacity for information exchange under the Convention and the Protocol;
 - 3.4. Synergies and differences in the implementation of the Biosafety Clearing-House and the clearing-house mechanism in Africa.
4. Preparation of regional needs assessments and priorities for action.
5. Conclusions and recommendations.
6. Adoption of the report.
7. Closure of the meeting.

2.3. Organization of work

14. At its 1st session, on 26 February, the Regional Meeting approved the proposed programme of work as contained in annex II to the annotations to the provisional agenda (UNEP/CBD/BCH/Afr.Reg/1/1/Add.1).

15. The Meeting agreed that it would work in plenary session, with break-out groups being formed for a more in-depth discussion of particular issues.

16. At the end of the 3rd session of the meeting, on 27 February 2001, the Meeting which had been conducted in plenary up until that time, split into four break-out groups (Francophone group; southern

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Africa subregion; West Africa subregion; Eastern Africa subregion and others), and each group was asked by the Chair to consider the four following issues:

- (a) Definition of the minimum that should be done within countries by the national focal point (NFP), the national competent authority (NCA) and others;
- (b) Which of the activities related to the Biosafety Clearing-House need to be coordinated at supranational (e.g., subregional/regional) level;
- (c) What kind of mechanism is needed to carry out this coordination in Africa;
- (d) What capacities are needed to achieve all of the above.

17. The aim of this exercise was to produce by the end of the meeting recommendations synthesizing the views from all four break-out groups.

ITEM 3. ISSUES FOR IN-DEPTH CONSIDERATION

3.1. Information exchange under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Biosafety Protocol

18. Agenda item 3.1 was taken up at the 1st session of meeting, on 26 February. Introducing the item, Ms. C. Sendashonga highlighted the relevant issues to be discussed under the item, based on documents prepared for the first meeting of the ICCP, and proposed that the meeting should consider the following elements:

- (a) Overview and direction of the clearing-house mechanism;
- (b) Operation of the Biosafety Clearing-House;
- (c) Information exchange requirements under the Biosafety Protocol;
- (d) Outcomes of the ICCP and possible implications for Africa.

19. She drew attention to two ICCP documents (UNEP/CBD/ICCP/1/3 and UNEP/CBD/ICCP/1/9) in which these issues were elaborated upon.

20. Mr. Marcos Silva, Programme Officer, Clearing-house Mechanism of the Convention Secretariat, made a presentation on the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention on Biological Diversity. With regard to information exchange, he noted that alternative information dissemination mechanisms capable of facilitating use of the Biosafety Clearing-House and the clearing-house mechanism were electronic mail and electronic discussion groups, file transfer protocol, teletype protocol, fax on demand, creation of CD-ROMs, paper and telephone calls.

21. Ms. Sendashonga then made a presentation on information-exchange requirements under the Biosafety Protocol.

Discussion

22. In the ensuing discussion, comments were made by representatives of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Lesotho, Morocco, Senegal, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe. One participant noted that there was need to determine how to train those responsible for data collection and analysis at the

national level to ensure that the Biosafety Clearing-House system succeeded. Another participant noted that equipment for gathering and disseminating information at the national level was too expensive for African countries and that capacity-building in this area should be considered. In response to this concern, a representative of the Secretariat pointed out that the cost of maintaining equipment was far greater than the initial cost of equipment. Consequently, use of technology should be included in any capacity-building initiative.

23. One participant asked what the level of funding for biosafety-related activities would be. In response, a representative of the Secretariat pointed out that the level of financial resources would depend on the needs of each country. Accordingly, countries should prepare project proposals and indicate their needs, and funding agencies would respond accordingly. A representative of the Secretariat noted that the needs of countries were not yet well defined and appealed to the participants to address these issues in their deliberations.

3.2. Biodiversity and biosafety information-exchange mechanisms in Africa

24. Agenda item 3.2 was taken up at the 2nd session of the meeting, on 26 February. The item was introduced by the Chair, who invited participants to review issues relating to the status of existing mechanisms of biodiversity and biosafety information exchange in Africa (such as electronic vs. non-electronic information exchange, major actors responsible for producing and disseminating information, availability and accessibility of existing information resources at a national and level).

25. Mr. Han de Koeijer of the Belgian Clearing-House Mechanism made a presentation on partnership with African countries. He said that the Belgian Clearing-House Mechanism was cooperating with Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritania and Niger in the area of information exchange. Within the framework of that partnership, the existing activities of the Belgian Clearing-House Mechanism were web-hosting, a mirror site and training courses for webmasters. Future activities included project development with partner countries, repatriation of partner websites and courses on taxonomic databases.

26. Mr. Giovanni Ferraiolo of the Biosafety Unit of the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) made a presentation on the possible roles of ICGEB in the implementation of the Protocol. He said that ICGEB was an international autonomous intergovernmental organization established as a centre of excellence for advanced research and training in molecular biology and biotechnology. The mandate of the centre was to promote the safe use of biotechnology worldwide and with special regard to the needs of the developing world. It funded fellowships (doctoral, short-term and post-doctoral), courses, workshops, research meetings and collaborative research programmes.

27. The Biosafety Unit of the Centre disseminated information through a biosafety database, Web pages and its publication, *Biosafety News*. With regard to capacity-building, it had, *inter alia*, organized annual biosafety workshops since 1992. The centre had been organizing advanced courses for experts in risk assessment. It was also provided expertise in the implementation of scientific biosafety project to member States which had requested its assistance. The Unit collaborated with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNEP and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

Discussion

28. In the ensuing discussion, comments were made by the representatives of AfricaBio, Belgium, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Canada, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Gambia, Ghana, ICGEB, Kenya, Lesotho, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

29. It was generally agreed that African countries encountered similar problems with regard to information-gathering and that the greatest problem was lack of capacity. One participant observed that the money received from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) was not sufficient for buying equipment and training personnel. In response to a query about what other assistance ICGBE gave in terms of training, Mr. Ferraiolo said that the Centre had been organizing training courses in risk assessment since 2000. The Centre also intended to provide expertise in the implementation of biosafety projects in the near future.

30. With regard to problems Africa could expect to encounter if it decided to set up a common database, Mr. Ferraiolo said that the first priority was to identify the type of information needed. He also noted that there were international organizations that could provide assistance for some of the specific problems.

31. It was pointed out that there was need for African countries to share information among themselves and that an agreed standard system should be established. In this connection, countries should first look at minimum national requirements and then proceed to establish a subregional and finally a regional focal point.

32. One participant expressed the view that African countries should concentrate more on national capacity-building while establishing links with other countries. In his view, a regional focal point was not a priority. Still on the issue of a regional focal point, a number of participants felt that it was evident that cooperation between countries resulted in many benefits.

3.3. *Building capacity for information exchange under the Convention and the Protocol*

and

3.4. *Synergies and distinctions in African implementation of the Biosafety Clearing-House and the clearing-house mechanism*

33. Agenda items 3.3 and 3.4 were taken up together at the 3rd session of the meeting, on 27 February. The items were introduced by the Chair. The representatives of five organizations made presentations.

34. Mr. Ahmed Djoghlaif of UNEP made a presentation on the UNEP/ Global Environment Facility (GEF) Biosafety Project. He pointed out that the general objective of the project was to build the biosafety capacity of developing countries. Its specified objectives were to assist up to 100 GEF-eligible countries to prepare their biosafety framework in readiness for entry into force of the Protocol on Biosafety and to promote regional and subregional cooperation in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe.

35. Mr. Han de Koeijer made a presentation on the Belgian Clearing-House biosafety server capacity-building for and with African countries. He said that the Clearing-House had started a training course on Web publishing in 1999.

36. Ms. Jocelyn Webster, AfricaBio, made a presentation on the activities of her organization. She pointed out that AfricaBio was a stakeholders' association that worked with the Global Industry Coalition (GIC) on capacity-building in biosafety. She noted that GIC had hands-on knowledge on biosafety issues and that it had expertise to share to enable the effective implementation of the Biosafety Protocol. She observed that a clearing-house would only be effective if the information was current and that the quality of the information was what was required for decision-making.

37. She said that capacity-building in the short term focused on bolstering electronic-access capabilities and expertise in Africa. To provide subregional biosafety focal points that were sustainable and could be implemented rapidly, consideration could be given to the establishment of subregional biosafety focal points under the leadership of UNEP and free from government control.

38. A representative of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Mr. Patrick Milimo, made a presentation on previous and planned biosafety-related activities of WWF in Africa. He said that WWF recognized the potential value to society arising from the new opportunities provided by the nascent science of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), especially for medical applications. He noted, however, that WWF was concerned about the potential dangers involved in releasing GMOs into the environment.

39. He pointed out that in its efforts to promote the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity, WWF had taken various initiatives prior to and after the adoption of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. During the negotiations, WWF had consistently advocated for a strong protocol and emphasized the right of every country to accept or to reject the use of GMOs and the need to apply the precautionary approach to the use and release of GMOs into the environment. He concluded by saying that the establishment of functional biosafety clearing-house at the national level was a critical step for the effective implementation of the Protocol.

40. Ms. Christine Wezsacker of the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development made a presentation on the evolving German capacity-building initiative in biosafety. She noted that capacity-building instruments included: policy advice; public administration; monitoring; evaluation and inspection services; basic and further training of decision makers, experts and multipliers; and public awareness-raising, education and promotion of public participation.

41. She emphasized that member States were obliged to nominate a competent authority and a biosafety focal point. She pointed out that competent authorities and independent structures should have the capacity to monitor importation of living modified organisms, establish national laboratories or access to regional facilities and training measures for monitoring and inspection institutions. She observed that public information, participation and open dialogue with civil society were essential. She pointed to the core problem of systems management in information, i.e. the matching of information needed and information available.

Discussion

42. Opening the discussion on the above agenda items, the Chair informed the participants that during the first meeting of ICCP, in Montpellier, he had written a project proposal for African capacity-building. He noted with satisfaction that reactions to the proposals by funding agencies had been very positive. A representative of UNEP pointed that UNEP would work closely with the Convention Secretariat in the establishment of a roster of experts within the framework of the UNEP/GEF Biosafety Project. One participant expressed the concern that African countries normally sent the wrong people for training when the opportunity arose and noted that this tendency threatened the sustainability of projects. In response to this concern, the Chair observed that that state of things could be corrected only by the countries concerned.

43. The Executive Director of ACTS, Mr. John Mugabe, said that his organization had four main biosafety projects. The first project, funded by the Norwegian Agency for Technical Cooperation (NORAD) aimed at broadening the constituency of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. The second involved the development of a policy guide to the Protocol. The third, also funded by NORAD, involved three types of training courses that included internships for institutions working on biosafety while the fourth was on assessment of capacity needs for the implementation of the Protocol.

44. One participant, noting that the training module for the establishment of the Clearing-House Mechanism by Belgium was holistic, wondered whether the training could be offered to a bigger regional group. In response, Mr. de Koeijer said that the number of trainees was restricted in order to make the training more effective. Another participant expressed the concern that all training was taking place in the North, too far away from the seat of the problem. He said that it would be advisable to have on-site training. He added that all those who were involved in information collection in a country should be trained. In response to this concern, the Chair said that training should be demand-driven and that such issues could only be solved by the country concerned.

45. Responding to a query on what the minimum level of expertise of persons on the roster of experts should be, the Chair encouraged countries to have their own definition of what they wanted as nothing could substitute national needs assessment and decisions.

ITEM 4. PREPARATION OF REGIONAL NEEDS ASSESSMENTS AND PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

46. The 4th session, on 28 February, opened with a presentation by the representative of OECD on BIOTRACK-BINAS (BIOBIN), the joint OECD/United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) biosafety database. The representative said that BIOBIN had been operating for five years. It included regulatory development, a database of field trials and a database of approved products. He pointed out that OECD concentrated on its members while UNIDO worked with non-OECD members

47. Following the presentation of OECD, the break-out groups presented their reports. During the ensuing discussion, statements were made by the representatives of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, France, Ghana, the Gambia, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Sudan, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

48. It was pointed out that subregional and regional cooperation was essential for successful implementation of the Protocol and a number of countries emphasized the importance of public participation. It was also noted that there was need for capacity-building for risk assessment. The Chair pointed out that African countries had to make a choice between hard and soft regional centres.

49. Following the short discussion, a drafting group was set up to prepare a synthesis of the salient points of the reports of the break-up groups. The drafting group, chaired by the Rapporteur, came up with a set of recommendations.

ITEM 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

50. Agenda item 5 was taken up at the 5th session of the meeting, on 28 February. The item was introduced by the Chair, who invited the Rapporteur to present the recommendations made by the drafting group. Following a short discussion, the Meeting adopted the recommendations, which are attached to the present report as annex I.

ITEM 6. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

51. The present report was adopted at the 5th session of the meeting, on 28 February 2001, on the basis of the draft report of the Meeting (UNEP/CBD/BCH/Afr.Reg/1/L.1).

ITEM 7. CLOSURE OF THE MEETING

The Chair declared the African Regional Meeting on the Biosafety Clearing-House and the Clearing-House Mechanism closed at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, 28 February 2001.

Annex I

**RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE AFRICAN REGIONAL MEETING ON THE BIOSAFETY
CLEARING-HOUSE AND THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM**

A. Issue 1 (minimum requirements within countries)

(a) Process and functions

1. Designation of National Focal Point and National Competent Authority
2. Need for national biosafety legal framework
3. Where National Focal Point and National Competent Authority are separate entities, the National Focal Point should act as the liaison between the country and the Convention Secretariat whereas the National Competent Authority will perform the administrative functions of the Protocol
4. The National Focal Point and the National Competent Authority should be located in a government-mandated institution
5. The National Focal Point should act as a coordinating body
6. The National Competent Authority must be able to interpret, filter and use information
7. Establish linkages between the clearing-house mechanism and the Biosafety Clearing-House
8. Ensure and promote public awareness and participation
9. Legal empowerment for the national competent authority to communicate final decisions pertaining to LMOs

(b) Infrastructure

10. Adequate hard/software and other equipment as required to search, locate, gather, receive, process, store and disseminate information
11. Common formats for exchange of information

(c) Human resources/technical expertise

12. Adequate expertise in the fields of information technologies, risk assessment and risk management, scientific, legal and administrative expertise

(d) Funding

13. Adequate and sustainable financial resources.

B. Issue 2 (Activities that need to be coordinated at supranational level)

1. Harmonize legislation (to the extent necessary for the effective implementation of the Protocol), and international standards for information exchange
2. Provision of training

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3. Develop a roster of experts at the subregional level
4. Assist with technical expertise
5. Establishment of mirror sites to improve access to and dissemination of information
6. A mechanism to create public awareness and participation

C. *Issue 3 (Mechanism needed to carry out this coordination in Africa)*

1. Subregional centres and /or arrangements should be created or strengthened as the case may be to facilitate cooperation and information sharing
2. There is a need for a regional African Biosafety Clearing-House for reference

D. *Issue 4 (Capacities needed to achieve all of the above)*

1. Capacity-building should lead to empowerment/reinforcement of national capabilities
2. Capacity to access and use the Internet
3. Ongoing training and retraining in information technologies
4. Development of required infrastructure
5. Technical expertise in biosafety including biotechnology required for biosafety
6. Legal expertise
7. Capacity development for public participation
8. Adequate funding.

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