



Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

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

**FAO/CBD/OECD online discussion of the International
Databases on Biosafety**

27 April – 10 May 2015

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

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Abstract

In preparation of the second joint FAO/CBD/OECD webinar on international biosafety databases: Good practices for effective national communication mechanisms, an online discussion on the topic of “Challenges and experiences in establishing and maintaining inter-agency communication on biosafety-related issues” was organized on 27 April to 10 May 2015. A total of 327 people registered to this forum and 50 comments were posted from 33 different countries.

The online discussion succeeded in gathering a large number of participants from different geographical regions who exchanged their views and experiences on national communication and coordination mechanisms in the area of biosafety. The outputs of the online discussion served as a basis for a follow-up webinar. The recommendations made by participants during the online discussion will be taken into account in the planning and implementation of future webinars and any other activities that will be jointly organized by the FAO, CBD and OECD.

Keywords: genetically modified foods; risk assessment; biosafety regulations; inter-agency communication; information exchange; FAO; CBD; OECD

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

In preparation for a joint FAO/CBD/OECD Webinar to address good practices for national communication and coordination mechanisms, which was 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 FAO, CBD and OECD biosafety-related databases could share their experiences and perspectives. This report summarizes the contributions that were made during the online discussion which helped improve the content of the follow-up webinar.

1.2 Objective

The online discussion was held with the objective of providing a forum where countries could share experiences, good practices and challenges in establishing effective national communication and coordination mechanisms on topics relevant to 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) through the Biosafety Clearing-House of the CBD at http://bch.cbd.int/onlineconferences/portal_art20/fao-cbd-oecd/discussion/.

1.4 Participation and practicalities

A total of 327 persons registered to participate in the online discussion which took place from 27 April 2015 to 10 May 2015.

Participants from 33 different countries posted a total of 50 contributions. From among the contributions, 9 were made by participants 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 relevant authorities was recognized by many of the participants. It was noted that since biosafety is a multidisciplinary topic, such coordination efforts are needed among all relevant regulatory agencies. Initiatives that may facilitate the establishment of functional coordination mechanisms were, therefore, seen as an important step in clarifying the role of the relevant institutions and avoiding 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 of such cross-sectoral bodies were provided by Belarus, Belgium, Cambodia, Cuba, Egypt, Ghana, Iran, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, LAO PDR, Lebanon, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Niger, Philippines, Spain, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. Furthermore, it was noted that a proposal for a cross-sectoral mechanism to be established in Bhutan is currently awaiting approval by its parliament.

Agencies identified as relevant in the coordination mechanisms have mandates in various sectors including Agriculture, Health, Environment, Trade, Finance, Science and Technology and Industry.

Some participants also noted that the cross-sectoral bodies in their countries also include non-governmental stakeholders such as civil society, NGOs and consumer associations. Participants further noted that the committees in their respective countries were established in accordance with mandates that were provided in the national legislations.

2.2 Role of formal cross-sectoral bodies

Despite the fact that participants from many countries noted the existence of some form of a cross-sectoral body in their countries, the mandate assigned to such entities varied among countries.

Regulatory responsibilities

Some countries have established a cross-sectoral body that makes regulatory decisions on GM applications. In Zimbabwe, where biotechnology and biosafety issues are considered highly cross-sectoral, a National Biotechnology Authority was established and designated as the competent authority for that country. In Turkey, a Biosafety Board is responsible for the decision making in response to GMO applications by taking into account the advice of a risk assessment and socio-economic committee. In Spain and Germany, the respective national biosafety committees are authorized to grant approvals for the use of GMOs for use in research or field trials.

Provision of scientific advice

Some participants also noted that their countries have established cross-sectoral committees for scientific advice. In Ghana, a technical advisory body (TAC) has been established in which experts of the various agencies, which are responsible for conducting risk assessments, convene with a view to developing a scientific review report. The review report is submitted to the national competent authority who 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 assessments. Spain has a National Commission on Biosafety that is comprised of scientific experts who are responsible for conducting risk assessments. Their scientific reviews are used to advise the competent authority and decision makers of the European Union. Uganda has established the Uganda Biosafety and Biotechnology Consortium in which relevant experts from various agencies convene with the view to providing policymakers with information that they need to make informed decisions and policies on GMO related issues.

Coordination and information sharing

Most cross-sectoral bodies that have been reported are also responsible for coordination and sharing information among the various involved agencies, ministries and institutes. Some participants noted that their countries have mechanisms that facilitate the functional coordination among the various relevant agencies (e.g. Belgium, Cuba, Iran, Mauritius and Mexico). Some participants also noted that the cross-sectoral bodies are responsible for harmonizing and improving regulatory procedures and setting standards (e.g. Cuba, LAO PDR and Philippines). It was further noted by various participants that the coordination mechanisms also collect, store and disseminate data and information on biosafety and GMOs (e.g. Japan and Malaysia). Some participants emphasized the importance of their national Biosafety Clearing House in collecting and sharing information (e.g. Moldova and South Korea).

2.3 Informal Communication Mechanisms

In addition to the formal communication mechanisms, a few examples of informal communication about the relevant agencies were noted during the online discussion. For example, a participant from Canada noted that when products are being simultaneously assessed by multiple agencies, a monthly informal teleconference is held amongst the relevant personnel to update each other on the status of their assessments. It was also noted that, in Japan, the communication among the different safety sectors (environment and food safety) relies heavily on informal networks and means of communication.

3 Challenges in achieving effective communication

Establishing effective frameworks

The participants of some countries noted that their biosafety regulatory framework is still under development or awaiting legislative approval and, therefore, coordination mechanisms are yet to be established (e.g. Bhutan and Rwanda). Participants of some other countries noted that several national institutes have been assigned functions on biosafety issues, but that no communication mechanism has yet been installed (e.g. Kazakhstan). Identifying the roles and responsibilities of each agency was also considered a challenge by some participants (e.g. LAO PDR and Malaysia). A participant from Japan noted that, in spite of the establishment of a coordination mechanism between the relevant ministries, no formal mechanism exist through which agencies, which are responsible for the different safety aspects (e.g. environmental and food safety), can interact.

Raising awareness

Some participants noted that lack of awareness among stakeholders, policymakers and the general public on the importance of the biosafety can result in insufficient resource allocation to biosafety-related matters (e.g. Malaysia, Uganda and Zimbabwe). Various participants also noted the need to integrate biotechnology and biosafety into their national educational systems as a means to increase public awareness (e.g. Iran and Zimbabwe).

Resource limitations

Participants from various countries noted that human and material resources are limited for achieving effective communication. Some participants noted that, being biosafety a relatively new area for many national institutions, their experience in performing a risk assessment is limited (e.g. Belarus, LAO PDR). The participant from the Philippines noted a challenge in implementing the National Biosafety Framework in that country as financial resources are not provided on a regular basis. This lack of regular funding prevents adequate capacity development of the scientific staff vis-a-vis the technological developments in biotechnology and biosafety. Furthermore, the participant from Slovenia noted that a scarcity in resources impedes proper coordination and timely response to the need of biosafety management. Some participants highlighted the need for more capacity development in the identification and detection of GMOs, noting that this would require the establishment of more laboratory facilities and training of staff (e.g. Iran, Niger and Zimbabwe).

Streamlining biosafety policies with other national policies

The participant from Zimbabwe noted that mainstreaming biosafety policies into national biodiversity strategic plans is a challenge. The participant from Madagascar noted a similar challenge and noted that the National Biosafety Committee in that country does not influence the development of policies in other regulatory sectors. That participant further noted that those policies sometimes do not take into account the national biosafety policies which leads to lack of a coordinated approach amongst biosafety and other regulatory authorities. The participant from Pakistan reported that the implementation of the Cartagena Protocol in that country remains a challenge due to limited knowledge and capacity to implement the Protocol's provisions.

Transparency

Some participants noted that achieving transparency, e.g. by accessing relevant data and information, is still a challenge in their countries. The participant from Moldova noted that this challenge originates from the fact that some academic institutions do not share relevant information with the regulatory agencies and/or public in that country. The participant from Iran noted that the need to further improve the national Biosafety Clearing House in that country as a means to facilitate information sharing among relevant stakeholders.

4 Role of international organizations

Databases

The roles of the three biosafety databases of FAO, CBD and OECD in providing the public and relevant stakeholders with centralized access to regulatory decisions and risk assessments were considered essential by many participants. Some participants also noted the importance of proper streamlining of the national data that they would share on the different databases (Belgium, Spain and Slovenia).

Training and Capacity Building

Several participants indicated that harmonized guidance, targeted training activities, webinars and/or workshops conducted at the national and regional levels could be useful in building capacity. These efforts could aim at enhancing countries' capacities to conduct risk assessments and promote interagency collaboration. One participant from Mauritius specifically asked for further guidance on how to streamline biosafety policies with other national policies. The participant from the Philippines noted the usefulness of the consensus documents, which were developed by the OECD, as they are relevant to the work of several relevant agencies.

Facilitating Communication Channels

It was also noted that facilitating the establishment of communication channels among relevant organizations could be a useful undertaking. The participant from Japan noted that the development of a list containing the names and coordinates of the focal/contact points of the three databases in each country would assist in the inter-sectoral communication and coordination of their national activities.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

The online discussion succeeded in gathering a large number of participants from different geographical regions who exchanged their views and experiences on national communication and coordination mechanisms in the area of biosafety. The outputs of the online discussion served as a basis for a follow-up webinar. The recommendations made by participants during the online discussion will be taken into account in the planning and implementation of future webinars and any other activities that will be jointly organized by the FAO, CBD and OECD.

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>