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3D BIO: Supporting compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)



3D BIO is a multi-stage vision and a conceptual design for operationalizing a bottom-up approach to strengthening the BWC. It complements, reinforces and strengthens the permanent prohibition of biological weapons enshrined in the Geneva Protocol and the BWC through a process of Declaration, Documentation and Demonstration (3D).

The aim of this workshop was to host the first of a series of meetings to raise and discuss the 3D BIO initiative with selected stakeholders, and to map a plan to take the initiative forward. The meeting took place at the Hotel Royal in Geneva on Sunday 9 August 2015, in advance of the BWC Meeting of Experts, and brought together a mix of state party representatives, civil society experts, think tanks and academics in a multistakeholder discussion.

The workshop provided the first opportunity for states to receive an in-depth briefing and to provide commentary and feedback on the 3D BIO initiative. The meeting generated a constructive and productive discussion, with considerable agreement on the way forward.

The workshop started with a welcome speech given by Ambassador Urs Schmid, followed by three sessions. The first session introduced the 3D BIO initiative, based on the SIPIR/EU Non-Proliferation Consortium Policy Brief written by Dr Filippa Lentzos. The second session examined other compliance mechanisms for disarmament treaties, and concluded that biological field should not replicate other disarmament mechanisms but can indeed learn and borrow from them. The third session was a group discussion about collectively moving forward without creating any political polarization of groups and segregation.

Key conclusions coming out of the discussion included the following:

- There is “no golden solution” to BWC verification. Verification is a qualitatively different and more difficult matter for the BWC than for other regimes, and therefore requires a different approach. Many participants welcomed the 3D BIO initiative, emphasizing that “it integrates and builds on other initiatives” and “tries to find common ground.” It was also highlighted that it “provides a normative framework and long-term vision.”

- It was noted that BWC verification has suffered from the success of the CWC, and that a BWC verification regime should not aim to look like those of other treaties (including the CWC). There is no single standard in verification; it depends on the weapon system, focus of agreement, consequences of non-compliance, and on what you're capable of doing. Verification can provide confirmation, but it is also a piece of information separate to intelligence gathering. In other words, it is additional, not substitutional.
- Information that comes through different set of actors—NGO's, journalists, intelligence units, and scientific communities—and state level confidence building measures (CBMs) are already existing methods; but they are not enough and participation remains insufficient. 3D Bio is a collective method and a systematic way to collect information.
- Partnership with civil society experts, think tanks and academics was thought essential for verification in the biological field—as it is in many fields.
- Setting a high standard, with high levels of transparency and assurance, was considered in everyone's interest, and rising above the lowest common denominator in order to move beyond the status quo and entrenched positions was considered a useful approach. But how to do that practically was more contentious, with some emphasising the need to make 3D BIO inclusive rather than exclusive. The selection of states included in the initial 'declare, document and demonstrate' exercise was thought of paramount importance. While states with biodefence programs and BSL4 laboratories were thought to have special responsibilities towards transparency, it was recognised that extra efforts would need to be made to emphasise this initiative as being cross-group and cross-regional.
- The importance of framing in communicating the initiative was also highlighted, and the need to avoid messaging that: the BWC is not working and therefore needs a fix; the initiative is an exclusive club; 3D BIO creates an additional hurdle that state parties face to comply with the treaty. It was suggested emphasising that the initiative is a cost efficient focus on where the greatest threat is, and that states without a biodefence programme/BSL4 labs, which are outside the selection criteria, would also gain from it through greater transparency. It was also suggested emphasising that the initiative is primarily about assurance, and not verification as traditionally understood.
- Participants discussed the purpose of verification for compliance, suggesting that that is part of deterrence. 3D BIO can be efficient to deter some security problems and it is worth considering for better security decisions. The 3D BIO verification concept centres on state-to-state verification measures; yet, it does not discount non-state actor problems. Proper control over biological facilities would decrease the likelihood of prompting non-state activity.
- Finally, it was recognised that the 3D BIO initiative is to begin a learning process for the long-term, and that it needs trial and error testing of its ideas. States have an interest in participating in 3D Bio exercises.