



UNECE



**Convention on
Biological Diversity**

**Third joint Aarhus Convention/Convention on Biological Diversity
Roundtable on Public Awareness, Access to Information and Public Participation regarding
Living Modified Organisms/Genetically Modified Organisms**

16-18 December 2019, Geneva, Switzerland
(Palais des Nations, Salle VII)

THE WAY FORWARD – CHAIR’S SUMMARY¹

1. In a closing statement, the Chair summarized a number of key issues derived from the discussions that need to be considered in the future work on access to information, public awareness and public participation in decision-making regarding LMOs/GMOs, including:

Regarding access to information

- Effective access to information is key for effective public participation;
- It is essential to provide access to information pro-actively as soon as the information becomes available, also considering needs of different target groups; raw data should be made available along with data visualization as the latter could make complex data easier understandable;
- It is essential to provide access to correct and complete information; and ensure that the publicly available information can also be re-used and shared;
- Certain information shall not be considered confidential, such as: (a) the name and address of the notifier; (b) a general description of LMOs/GMOs; (c) a summary of the risk assessment of the effects on biodiversity, taking into consideration human health; (d) any methods and plans for emergency measures; and (e) all final decisions. A verifiable justification is needed if data should be kept confidential;
- It is important to ensure identification of LMOs/GMOs through labelling not only for biosafety purposes, but also for reasons of consumer information, such as ethical and religious concerns;
- There is a need for access to information on synthetic biology and new technologies;

Regarding public awareness

- It is important for authorities to develop communication strategies that will include key target groups, communication channels (e.g. newspapers, social media, TV, posters in public places, stickers and press materials), responsible personnel and to allocate the required costs and other resources for communication activities;
- Efforts should be made to translate scientific information into local languages;

¹ This Chair’s summary was not formally edited.

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- NGOs role is important for raising awareness of general public on the topic of LMO/GMO;

Regarding **public participation in decision-making**

- Public participation in decision-making should not be seen as a tool to veto decisions, but rather as a tool to improve them;
- A trustful, sustainable and transparent decision-making process can be achieved in collaboration with civil society;
- Decision-making on LMO/GMO related matters needs to take into account scientific knowledge (related to biosafety) as much as human values and ethical principles and religious concerns; and should take into account the right to self-determination of the local communities;
- It is important to strengthen inter-institutional and inter-departmental coordination, in particular, during public participation processes, and also through setting up of public advisory bodies for supporting these processes;
- It is important to ensure gender-equality and promote inclusive public participation, with particular attention to women and indigenous peoples, local communities and other marginalized groups, and use local languages in public participation processes;
- Involvement of various groups of population, from urban to rural, with different level of education, age, sex, professional occupation in open discussion and considering their perception and raising their understanding of the problem is critically important;
- It is critical to ensure a step-by-step implementation of the key elements of effective public participation in decision-making, namely:
 - Identify the public and the public concerned
 - Issue timely, adequate and effective notice
 - Set reasonable time-frames when all options are open
 - Ensure access to all necessary information
 - Ensure procedures that enable public to comment and be heard
 - Ensure that due account is taken of public participation
 - Notify promptly about the decision
 - Make sure that if commitments/conditions are revised, the procedure should be repeated as appropriate

2. The Chair further observed that the round table called for several actions **at the national level** to:

- Establish or enhance the implementation of effective procedures and mechanisms for effective access to information, public awareness and for enabling effective and inclusive public participation in decision-making with regard to LMOs/GMOs;
- Continue strengthening coordination and cooperation between national focal points of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety at national level;

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- Continue promoting effective inter-ministerial/interdepartmental mechanisms to handle GMO/LMO issues that are open to NGOs, academia and other stakeholders e.g. through the setup of inter-institutional commissions;
 - Mainstream biosafety, including public awareness, education and participation regarding LMO/GMO matters, into different sectors and policies;
 - Strengthen capacity of authorities to effectively handle access to information and public participation in decision-making on LMO/GMO matters through targeted training;
 - Allocate sufficient human, technical and financial resources in particular, in authorities, to handle effectively access to information and public participation procedures, and awareness arising activities;
 - Enforce implementation of domestic legislation related or applicable to LMOs/GMOs;
 - Develop and / or strengthen expertise and institutional capacity of authorities dealing with biosafety matters through e.g. capacity building activities as needed, including on new developments in the field of LMOs/GMO, such as gene drive techniques or synthetic biology;
 - Consider establishing a consultative body consisting of scientists who examine environmental risk assessments to overcome insufficient expertise and limited technical and human capacity in authorities;
 - In order to ensure good quality information, develop or strengthen the reference laboratory equipment for monitoring and detection of LMOs/GMOs and the possibility of establishing a network of laboratories nationwide;
 - Promote widely benefits of effective access to information and public participation in decision-making related to LMOs/GMOs. Such benefits include enhanced trust, better quality of decisions, accountability and better governance; improved relationships between decision-makers and the public and among different stakeholders; enhanced smooth implementation and improved legitimacy of decisions; economic gains and improved sustainability of the projects;
 - Promote greater political support to transparency, accountability and to effective and inclusive public participation in decision-making in relation to LMO/GMO matters;
 - Engage broad target audiences and strengthen capacity of the public, media, NGOs, academia, business, women, indigenous peoples and local communities through targeted trainings on e.g. knowledge, awareness of LMOs/GMOs; and on how to participate, as to ensure meaningful public's input;
 - Make use of the Aarhus Centres, where available, to assist authorities to promote effectively access to information and public participation in decision-making related to LMO/GMO issues;
 - Encourage to reflect in the goal of the new implementation plan for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety on Article 23 of the Protocol, the synergy with the Aarhus Convention and its GMO Amendment; and make the Programme of Work on public

awareness, education and participation regarding LMOs/GMOs a reference guide to implementing the goal in the implementation plan;

- For Parties to the Aarhus Convention - ratify and implement the GMO Amendment to the Aarhus Convention;
- Encourage countries in and outside UNECE region to accede to the Aarhus Convention and its GMO Amendment and/or to make use of the Lucca Guidelines² and the Maastricht Recommendations³ as tools for developing legislation and procedures for effective access to information and public participation in the context of LMOs/GMOs;
- Make use of guidance materials⁴, developed jointly under the auspices of the two treaties;
- Promote complete and accurate access to information and public participation through the Biosafety Clearing-House⁵ and share case-studies on promoting access to information and public participation through the Aarhus Clearing-House⁶;
- Make use of the communication plan template from the SCBD or develop a new communication plan to promote improved public understanding of biotechnology/biosafety issues for active participation in decision-making processes and to take socio-economic considerations into account;

3. **At the multilateral level**, the Secretariats and subsidiary bodies of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity should, as appropriate, continue assisting countries in ratifying and implementing the two instruments in the context of LMOs/GMOs through:

- Providing information material, organising events and advisory assistance to countries as to promote ratification of the GMO Amendment, and the implementation of Article 23 of the Protocol and the Aarhus Convention in the context of GMOs/LMOs;
- Finalizing the “GMO pocket guide” describing benefits, systemic challenges, priority areas and good practices in relation to promoting transparency and public participation in GMO/LMO matters; and developing a video to promote the materials and tools developed jointly under the auspices of the two treaties;
- Organising a similar round table in the next inter-sessional period of the two treaties as to allow Parties to both instruments from different regions to exchange experiences thereby supporting implementation of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol in the context of LMOs/GMOs in synergy, and explore opportunities to allocate funds also for participation of non-UNECE countries. The round table would include training sessions on e.g. specific case studies;

² Available at <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/gmos.html>

³ Available at <https://www.unece.org/index.php?id=49142&L=0>

⁴ Available at <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/gmos.html>

⁵ <https://bch.cbd.int>

⁶ <https://aarhusclearinghouse.unece.org>

In the light of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the transparency and effective public participation have acquired increased significance for the work on GMO/LMO matters, in particular, relevant for:

- SDG 2 (zero hunger), especially, targets related to food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture (targets 2.2 and 2.4) – access to information and public participation in the development and implementation of agriculture-related policies, plans, programmes and projects.
- SDG 15 (life on land), access to information and public participation in decisions on LMOs/GMOs is crucial for raising public awareness and better decisions regarding the use of genetic resources, sustainable use of ecosystems and biodiversity.
- SDG 16 (responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making) – the principles of accountability, transparency, inclusivity and the rule of law contained within SDG 16 are key for the implementation of all SDGs, whether directly referred to or otherwise.

The joint efforts by the two secretariats and the treaties' bodies thereby also support countries' efforts to achieve these SDGs.

4. The key outcomes of the joint round table will be reported to the twenty-fourth meeting of the Working Group of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention (Geneva, 1 - 3 July 2020) and to the seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention (October 2021), and shared with the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol (Kunming, China, October 2020).