

Seventh session of the Meeting of the Parties to the UNECE Aarhus Convention

Tuesday, 19 October 2021
Geneva, Switzerland

Substantive Issues – Agenda Item 6 (d) Genetically Modified Organisms

Report by the Chair of the Round Table on GMOs/LMOs

Thank you very much Madame Chair.

As Chair of the third joint round table on public awareness, access to information and public participation regarding living modified organisms (LMOs)/genetically modified organisms (GMOs), I have the honour and pleasure to briefly report to the Meeting of the Parties on the main outcomes of this and other GMO related activities which took place during the intersessional period 2018-2021.

A highlight during this period was certainly the third **Joint Round Table on Public Awareness, Access to Information and Public Participation regarding Living Modified Organisms/Genetically Modified Organisms**. It took place in Geneva from 16 to 18 December 2019. As the previous two Round Tables, the third Round Table was held under the auspices of the UNECE Aarhus Convention and the secretariat to the Convention on Biological Diversity under the leadership of Austria.

The Round Table brought together representatives of Governments, academia, the private sector, NGOs and other experts engaged in the implementation of both instruments from numerous countries of Europe, Asia, Africa and North and South America. Participants explored new patterns for sharing resources and best practices and for combining various regional perspectives into a shared vision.

The aim of the Round Table was to: contribute to strengthening countries' capacities in promoting public awareness, access to information and public participation regarding LMOs/GMOs by sharing knowledge, experiences and lessons learned; and develop recommendations for concrete actions in that respect.

The Round Table resulted in several proposals for the way forward.

At national level, proposed actions included:

- (a) The continued **strengthening of coordination and cooperation** between national focal points of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety;
- (b) **Mainstreaming biosafety**, including public awareness, education and participation regarding LMO/GMO matters, **into different sectors and policies**;
- (c) **Strengthening the expertise and institutional capacity of authorities** dealing with biosafety matters through, for example, capacity-building activities, **including on**

new developments in the field of LMOs/GMOs, such as gene drive techniques and synthetic biology;

- (d) **Channeling LMO/GMO monitoring and detection equipment to national reference laboratories** in order to strengthen them and **establishing a network of reference laboratories nationwide.**

At multilateral level, the secretariats and subsidiary bodies of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety **should continue to assist countries in ratifying and implementing the two instruments** in the context of LMOs/GMOs.

This also included the **completion of a Pocket guide** to strengthen capacities of Governments and stakeholders in providing effective access to information and public participation in decision-making processes regarding LMOs/GMOs. This informal training and learning tool had been prepared on the basis of experiences shared by Parties to and stakeholders of the Cartagena Protocol and the Aarhus Convention.

The Guide also builds on other capacity-building resources developed under the two instruments related to access to information and public participation regarding LMOs/GMOs. All interested Governments and stakeholders had an opportunity to submit their comments through two rounds of consultations held in 2019-2020.

The Pocket Guide is available in English; it was translated in Arabic, Chinese and Spanish. The translations into French and Russian have just been completed and will be made available online in due course. I strongly encourage Governments and stakeholders to use this Pocket Guide.

Throughout the intersessional period, **bilateral collaboration on GMOs** was ongoing between the secretariats of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Both secretariats continuously promoted the use of e-learning modules, checklists and other tools developed jointly under the Aarhus Convention and the Convention on Biological Diversity. A call for submitting useful resources to the Biosafety Clearing-House and the Aarhus Clearinghouse is ongoing.

The **most recent example** of this fruitful cooperation was the active involvement of the secretariat of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in the organization of the **two thematic sessions at the twenty-fifth meeting of the Working Group** in May and June 2021: the first on promoting the principles of the Convention in international forums with a thematic focus on biosafety and geoeengineering; and the second with a focus on access to information, public participation and access to justice in relation to GMOs.

I had the pleasure of moderating the Thematic session on GMOs in June. During this thematic session, the Working Group of the Parties:

- (a) Reiterated that promotion of awareness, education, transparency and effective public participation in GMO/LMO-related decision-making was key for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 2 (zero hunger),

especially targets related to food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture, Goal 15 (life on land) and Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions);

- (b) Recognized that the joint efforts by Parties, the treaties' bodies and the two secretariats helped to support countries' efforts to achieve those Sustainable Development Goals; and that enhanced cooperation at the national and international levels served Parties to both instruments;
- (c) Acknowledged the importance of the following actions, which needed to be taken by Parties:
 - (i) Establish or enhance implementation of effective procedures and mechanisms for effective access to information, public awareness and for enabling effective and inclusive public participation in decision-making and access to justice with regard to LMOs/GMOs;
 - (ii) Continue strengthening coordination and cooperation between national focal points of the Aarhus Convention and the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

Before I conclude, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that **only one more ratification** is needed for the GMO amendment to enter into force. Only one more Party! We are so close to the GMO amendment to enter into effect.

Looking ahead, I would like to express my sincere hope that the GMO amendment will finally enter into force during the next intersessional period.

I already mentioned during the thematic session: "The GMOs topic remains "a moving target": While technology and knowledge continues to develop, open questions and challenges remain or get even bigger with new technology available."

I very much look forward to working with you on trying to find answers to some of these open questions and develop solutions to these challenges during the next intersessional period.

Thank you, Madame Chair.