



Delegation of Italy to
the Conference on Disarmament
Geneva

**Working Group on the strengthening of
the Biological Weapons Convention**

S&T mechanism

**Statement delivered by Amb. Leonardo Bencini,
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to the Conference on Disarmament
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Thank you, Chair.

Since this is the first time I'm taking the floor at this session of the Working Group, I hope you will indulge me if I make some general comments before tackling the specific issue of the S&T mechanism.

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to express appreciation for the accession of Tuvalu and Micronesia to the BWC. Two years ago, after I had been nominated President of the IX BWC Review Conference, in the run-up to and in preparation for the Conference, I met the representatives of all the not-very-many countries that had not acceded to the Convention yet, I believe 13 at the time, including those two I mentioned. My goal and my duty as President was to lobby in favour of joining the BWC and move towards universalisation, so I had to make a good case for accession. I used the argument that it was in those countries' interest to be part of a global ecosystem in the event of an outbreak, whether man-made or natural. Covid-19 had shown everyone that pathogens do not stop at borders and – as we used to say at the time – that no one is safe until everyone is safe. Covid-19 was a truly global crisis. Also, when I met those countries I drew their attention to the opportunities that article X could offer them, especially smaller countries, in terms of international cooperation and assistance. And it would cost them next to nothing in terms of financial contribution to the BWC budget. I would add that the goal of universalisation is intrinsic in a Convention such as this, that only by being universal it can achieve its goals.

On the specific aspect of the S&T mechanism, let me first of all express my delegation's gratitude and appreciation to the Friends of Chair for the work they have carried out over the past year or so. By the way, this work was based on the previous

work and consultations conducted before and during the Review Conference. We have been discussing this question for several years now, there have been a number of proposals on the table so we have gone a long way and I have to say that we have steadily moved closer and closer to consensus. Let us finish the job now.

I would like to draw this group's attention, actually to remind delegations of what we agreed on back in 2022, in particular point 12 of section B of the Final Document of the IX Review Conference that reads thus:

The Conference urges the Working Group to complete its work as soon as possible, preferably before the end of 2025.

Why did the Conference agree to urge – that's quite a strong word, to urge - this WG to complete its work as soon as possible? Because there was a clear sense of urgency in that sentence that we all shared. It was the sense of urgency of the world just coming out of the worst pandemic in a century. We had to rise to the occasion and, if only partially, we did and we did so by establishing this working group and deciding to develop two mechanisms.

The two mechanisms had a special place in the Final Document, specific separate paragraphs for both of them. This is why we think they should be part of what we and others have called an "early harvest", a decision to be made in 2025 at a special conference. 2025 is an important year for our Convention. On 26 March 2025 it will fifty years since its entry into force. It is an important symbolic moment, and we think that it would be a fitting occasion to agree on the mechanisms. And let's be clear about it: we may call it "early harvest" but in fact it would be more of a "late harvest", a "long overdue improvement" in the way of strengthening of the Convention.

I have heard some delegations say that we should not rush into an agreement. Quite frankly, the last thing we have done has been rushing into something. If anything, at some point in the history of the BWC we have run around in circles. So we think the time has come to deliver. And when it comes to the early harvest, I see two approaches. One that goes, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. A common approach in negotiations. In other words, we have to find an agreement on all the seven points indicated in the Final Document and on the two mechanisms at the same time.

But there is another approach, the one that we favour. This second approach is that we should not allow issues that are more mature to be held hostages by others that are not so mature. In other words, that if we are close to consensus on one issue we should not keep it on hold, keep it frozen until we reach consensus on all the others.

We view the first approach, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, as an all-or-nothing approach, an approach that could endanger the significant progress that we made at the Review Conference and within this Working Group because we might end up with nothing. At this point in the history of the Convention, we really believe that any improvement is better than nothing and while we should strive for concrete results

on all the issues in the mandate of the WG, if we can already find agreement on one or two of them then we should formalise this agreement at a Special Conference before the X Review Conference. Our ideal goal would be a Special Conference that would approve the ICA and the S&T mechanisms. There is still time for a decision on that and on the convening of a Special Conference by 2025.

Specifically on the S&T mechanism, on the non-paper by the Friends of the chair, I would like to make the following comments. I tried this. I took out most if not all the square brackets to see if it worked. And it does – it does work. We are happy with this paper. And not surprisingly, as this is the result of not just months but years of consultations and negotiations. This is the most mature item on our agenda. The informal debate that we had yesterday afternoon confirmed the extraordinary degree of convergence on this mechanism. Consensus is within reach. This is why I appeal to all delegations not to let this one pass.

As far as Italy's position is concerned, I would like to emphasise a few points.

We understand the need to establish a hybrid mechanism composed of a larger body open to all States parties, and a smaller one with only some of them. 30 seems to us a good number.

Scientists and not diplomats should sit in these two bodies. This is a key point. What we want within this Convention is to make informed decisions and for us, for diplomats, to make informed decisions we need sound scientific advice. On these very technical matters, on scientific matters that develop extremely fast, we need the expertise and the specialised knowledge that only scientists have. States parties should take this aspect very seriously when putting forward their nominations. And the advisory process should be fully independent, completely free from political influence, otherwise it would not be credible and most of all it would not provide us with what we need.

Let us not forget that this is a consultative mechanism. The proposal we have on the table mentions an S&T Advisory Board. And advisory board. This board would not make decisions except those strictly relating to the advice they will provide. But their advice will be necessary for the BWC political bodies to make decisions, that is for the Meeting of States Parties and for the Review Conferences. The MSP and the Review Conference would give the Advisory Board guidelines and would identify the areas that need to be addressed. But the Advisory Board should also be in a position to alert the MSP and the Review Conference to new and unforeseen developments in life sciences and biotechnology and of possible new threats. The scientists serving in the advisory board should be held to the highest ethical standards. Although deciding by consensus, when formulating its recommendations, the Board should mention all minority views.

We support the idea that the final composition of the smaller body is decided by the Chair and the Bureau in a way that reflects the widest possible range of knowledge as well as geographical and gender balance.

One concern we have heard is that not all States parties would have scientists to nominate. I do not believe this is necessarily true. They might not have experts in every relevant scientific field but they will certainly have someone who could bring their contribution in some fields. Let me say a few words about the ICGEB. Italy proudly hosts in Trieste and supports the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology. The ICGEB runs over 45 state-of-the-art laboratories, in Trieste, New Delhi, and Cape Town and forms an interactive network with almost 70 Member States, the vast majority of which from the so called Global South, with operations that are aligned to those of the United Nations System. It plays a key role in Biotechnology promoting Research excellence, Training, and Technology Transfer to industry, to contribute in concrete terms to sustainable global development. For decades, the ICGEB has been training scientists in developing countries because that is its mission. We have seen a new generation of scientists come to the fore in those countries. There is no shortage of them. There are scientists specialised in life sciences and biotechnology in almost every country of the world today.

In conclusion, just one minor observation on a point that was raised yesterday during the informal meeting. We appreciate the very operational manner in which this proposal has been presented by the Friends of the Chair. This to us is also a clear indication of how far we have come. We have a draft decision in front of us. This is a decision for a Special Conference to make. The WG as such cannot establish the mechanisms, only a Special Conference or a Review Conference can. But the MSP can make a decision to convene that Conference. We are convinced that, with enough political will, we could have that Conference in 2025 and bridge any gaps that remain towards consensus in the run-up to it. Chair, Italy stands ready to work with all delegations towards this goal.

I thank you.