

International Networking to Prevent the Misuse of Biology for Hostile Purposes

Southern African workshop organized by the BioWeapons Prevention Project, Johannesburg (South Africa), 7 April 2004

The BWPP seeks to build a global network of non-governmental organizations in support of the norms against the weaponization of disease. The seminar organized in Johannesburg on 7 April 2004 was the first step of a pilot project in support of the ‘Catalysing Change: Avoiding Failure in 2006’ programme.¹ Its general purpose was to inform southern African non-governmental organizations (NGOs) about the BWPP and its goals and to introduce the principles upon which the organization has been established. More specifically, the meeting tried to identify the areas of overlap between the goals of southern African NGOs and those of the BWPP and to explore opportunities for collaboration. The seminar also fit into the more general effort to understand how civil society outside Europe and North America experiences the biological weapon (BW) threat in relation to local and regional societal and human security challenges. The pilot project is supported by a grant from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry.

Participating in the seminar were representatives from the African Centre for Biosafety (South Africa), BioWeapons Prevention Project (Switzerland), Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (Zimbabwe), Centre for Conflict Resolution (South Africa), Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (Malawi), Institute for Security Studies (South Africa), International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (Zambia), Safer Africa (South Africa), South African Institute for International Affairs (South Africa), South African Police Service (South Africa), and Transformation Resource Centre (Lesotho). Most of these organizations are already member of the BWPP network.²

The meeting began with a presentation by Chandré Gould (Centre for Conflict Resolution, South Africa, and Chairwoman of the BWPP Board of Directors), who noted the underrepresentation of African states in the 1972 Biological and Toxin

¹ ‘Catalysing Change’ is described in the BWPP Strategic Programme 2004–06, available from <<http://www.bwpp.org/documents/2004-06BWPPstrategicprogramme.pdf>>.

² The full membership list is available from <<http://www.bwpp.org/partners.html>>.

Weapons Convention (BTWC) and the low level of African participation in the further development of the treaty regime and its confidence-building mechanisms. Referring to South Africa's unilateral abandonment of its offensive BW programme; the use of anthrax bacteria in the Rhodesian civil war in the late 1970s and the recent outbreak of the disease as a consequence of the breakdown of the social infrastructure and lack of maintenance of the farms in Zimbabwe; the global threat of terrorism and the many armed conflicts in Africa; and the societal threats posed by disease, poverty and declining biodiversity, she emphasized the stakes of African societies and governments in preventing biological warfare on the continent. They should also seize the opportunities offered by the BTWC with regard to international cooperation in order to deal with the many societal challenges.³

Jean Pascal Zanders (Director BWPP) outlined the 'Catalysing Change: Avoiding Failure in 2006' programme, which envisages the active participation of civil society organizations from the five continents, and its concrete goals in support of the 6th Review Conference of the BTWC in 2006. He detailed the different components of the programme, which are closely interrelated. On the one hand, they aim to raise issue awareness and build civil society capacity to engage governments, other authorities and professional and scientific associations in support of the strengthening of the norms against BW. On the other hand, they will contribute to the generation of transparency through the monitoring of and reporting on policies and activities relevant to the prevention of biological warfare inside the respective countries.⁴

The debate opened with a reflection on the need to identify a focal issue, which can galvanize governments into action and which can easily be related to the concrete needs of different civil society constituents. With regard to BW, the immediate identification of such a central topic around which to build a campaign is not straightforward. In contrast to several other issue areas, such as the treaty on anti-personnel landmines or the Cartagena Protocol on genetically modified organisms, the core prohibition on BW has been in place for decades. Furthermore, the civil-society action against BW seeks to prevent something from happening in the future rather than to address an acute threat that affects people in their everyday lives. The campaign (fortunately) also lacks the graphic detail that enabled the international mobilization of humanitarian sentiments against the indiscriminate maiming of civilians, even long after the war had finished. In other words, as one participant expressed it, effort will have to be put in explaining to the people why they should be concerned about BW (without exaggerating the issue). As it considers how to frame the relevant areas, the issue-awareness programme must take the following three imperatives into account:

- the clear definition of issues;
- the focus on a limited number of issues with which the target audience is most familiar; and

³ Gould, C., 'On the need for civil society monitoring of norms against biological weapons in southern Africa', URL <http://www.bwpp.org/documents/20040407Civilsocietymonitoring_000.pdf>.

⁴ Zanders, J. P., 'Preserving biology for a healthy future', URL <<http://www.bwpp.org/documents/20040407Preservingbiology.pdf>>

- the use of a language adapted to the target audience, which at times may require the popularization of issues.

The participant compared the approach to the one used by doctors to avoid speaking over the heads of patients. Nevertheless, as another participant cautioned, this does not imply that there is no need to identify the deeper causes of some of the issues. Such deeper understanding combined with the clear use of language and the adoption of a common understanding of key concepts are prerequisites for framing the debate and reaching out to other organizations and communities. Noting that the mix and understanding of issues may differ considerably from country to country, a participant suggested that the BWPP should first explore how different communities experience those issues and then tailor its message to reflect those community experiences.

From this discussion it emerged that the current and future BWPP Network members participating in the issue awareness raising and capacity building activities will have to work with two very different constituencies: local communities and policy shapers (e.g., the media, professional and scientific associations, etc.) and makers (government, regional and local authorities with regulatory powers, etc.). The key roles for the BWPP in supporting the local and regional activities thus appear to be:

- assistance with the search for new network partners (via the regional BWPP network coordinators);
- capacity-building of those people who will be directly involved in the local issue awareness campaigns or who will interact with the policy makers and shapers (via regional and local seminars);
- preparation of basic materials and information packages, which the local network members then can use for their own specific activities;
- preparation of background materials for the media; and
- capacity-building for the BWPP monitoring and reporting functions.

A fundamental point raised is that the BWPP will have to formulate alternatives to the positions, policies and events it criticizes in order to avoid terminating the debate with the posing of the questions.

One of the key challenges the BWPP will encounter is the absence of organizations or even individuals with a primary interest in the prevention of biological warfare or the strengthening of the norms against the misuse of biology and biotechnology for hostile purposes. There exist many organizations whose work and interest partially overlap with the BWPP goals, but it must be realized that they will retain their primary focus. A participant raised the point that while many types of organizations share the interest in preventing the misuse of science, the specifics of their issue areas, methodologies, and so on, differ. In addition, the levels of expertise and knowledge may vary considerably among these organizations. The challenge for the BWPP will be to bring these organizations together, while respecting their specific agendas. Another participant considered that such diversity actually strengthens the network. Any type of network consists of active and passive members. Therefore the BWPP ought to reach out to a large number of organizations and people in order to acquire an active core. Endorsement of its ambitions could also come in the form of

moral and technical support. A major milestone will have been achieved once the network members are able to engage organizations such as trade unions, inter-church councils, and so on, whose endorsements or participation will make the issues much more difficult to ignore by the policymakers and shapers.

Several participants, speaking from experience, cautioned that the BWPP networking goal is a long-term project that will take many years to achieve. The development of the small arms network was presented as an example: the first months and years consisted simply of explaining to people why the issues are important. A few organizations were involved in this initial phase; the broader base only came later. As a starting point, a participant suggested that the organizations taking part in this seminar should inform other organizations with whom they collaborate of the BWPP.

Given the central aim to strengthen the norms against BW, there is a natural tendency for the BWPP to focus on international treaties, national implementation legislation and other regime-building mechanisms, such as confidence building measures. Several participants cautioned against starting meetings or capacity-building initiatives from this angle. People in Europe and North America are trained to think in terms of international treaties, multilateral institutions and legislation, but this approach is much less part of the culture south of the equator. In this sense, the BWPP's approach in southern Africa will have to be quite different from that in Geneva. Any activity the BWPP undertakes in support of building civil society issue awareness and capacity must start from the basic question 'What are biological weapons?' and then follow-up with the identification of the concerns raised by these weapons in the specific contexts relevant to the southern African people. This implies that the work should be less focussed on the levels of international and state security, but more so on those of individual and community security. This relates to questions of human rights, riot control, and so on, as well as to other aspects of human security, like health, biodiversity, food, etc. As one participant summarized, in order to achieve the goals of strengthening the norms and the treaties against BW, it is important to answer the following practical questions:

- Why are the BW issues relevant to the work I do?
- Why are the BW issues relevant to the region I live in?
- Why are the BW issues relevant to the groups I work with?

Once these have been addressed it will become much easier to demonstrate to a society, and thus to a government, why it is relevant to sign up to a multilateral treaty or to actively participate in the further development of the treaty regime, and to explain the relevance to civil society to know that their country has signed up to the BTWC and other treaties supporting the norms against BW.