

SBSTTA 26 ENSURING GOOD GOVERNANCE OF SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY

At the Conference of Parties (COP) 15 of the Convention of Biodiversity, Parties established, in Decision 15/31, a “broad and regular” process of multidisciplinary horizon scanning, assessment and monitoring of new developments in Synthetic Biology. The need for this process was already identified by Parties in Decision 14/19, and provides a means for governments to collaboratively track and provide timely responses to biodiversity threats and opportunities emerging from modern biotechnology developments.

In the past two years, the multidisciplinary Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group (mATHEG) on Synthetic Biology was mandated to develop the methodology for this “broad and regular” process. The mATHEG undertook a first round of multidisciplinary horizon scanning, monitoring, and assessment and reported their findings. They identified key areas of developments for policy attention, issued a set of recommendations to the SBSTTA for the methodology of the broad and regular process, and articulated proposals for further policy work on priority areas.

KEY POINTS FOR SBSTTA 26

1

ADOPT THE METHODOLOGY FOR THE “BROAD AND REGULAR PROCESS”

The mATHEG’s report strongly shows that the development and “test run” of a **Multidisciplinary Horizon Scanning, Assessment and Monitoring Process (MHSAMP)** was successful. The SBSTTA should now formally endorse the mATHEG’s methodology as the basis of the “broad and regular” process, as established in paragraph 4 of CBD COP decision 15/31. The SBSTTA should affirm that “regular” means that the process should occur intersessionally, at least in each biennium.

2

RE-EMPHASIZE MULTIDISCIPLINARITY AND PRECAUTION

The experience and conclusions of the Multidisciplinary Horizon Scanning, Assessment and Monitoring Process (MHSAMP) on Synthetic Biology’s first cycle has demonstrated the value and feasibility of applying a multidisciplinary approach that supports the three objectives of the Convention as well as the precautionary approach in accordance with the Preamble of the Convention. This aligns with several previous decisions on Synthetic Biology which emphasized the need for a precautionary approach and the involvement of intercultural and multidisciplinary knowledge, particularly that of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs). In particular, previous decisions requested ensuring the full and effective participation of IPLCs in the discussions and in the work on synthetic biology under the Convention. Simultaneously, proper implementation of the procedure is a necessary safeguard to avoid or/and manage conflicts of interests in expert groups, adopted in decision 14/33.

3

INITIATE POLICY FORMULATION PROCESSES ON 1. INTEGRATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) WITH SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY AND 2. SELF-SPREADING VACCINES FOR WILDLIFE

The conclusions by the mATHEG of the first round of the MHSAMP included advice to undertake a policy formulation process and assessment of two prioritized topics,

as proposed by the mAHTEG: 1. Integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with synthetic biology, and; 2. Engineered self-spreading vaccines for wildlife.

The mAHTEG provided specific proposals on how this can be achieved in the next intersessional period. The SBSTTA should endorse those recommendations to robustly address their implications and include an assessment of the ecological, socioeconomic, cultural impacts arising from integration of artificial intelligence with synthetic biology, as well as those of self-spreading vaccines before endorsing its release. In the case of the self-spreading vaccines, this should also include the development of mechanisms for the free, prior and informed consent of IPLCs that may be potentially affected.

4

COMPLETE THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECT OF GENE DRIVE ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES

As enshrined in the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and to align with previous decisions on organisms containing engineered gene drives, in order to support the right of Parties to take socioeconomic considerations in decision-making on living modified organisms into account, guidance materials on risk assessment of such organisms (CBD/SBSTTA/26/5/Add.1) should be accompanied by additional advice. As recommended by the mAHTEG, such guidance materials must incorporate a wider assessment of the socioeconomic, cultural, and ethical impacts of engineered gene drives, with particular consideration given to IPLCs. Such a process could be undertaken in conjunction with a renewed mandate of the AHTEG on Socio-economic Considerations under the Cartagena Protocol, and/or through other relevant processes of the Convention.

5

ADDRESS OTHER PRIORITIES

To align with the outcomes of the mAHTEG, the SBSTTA may wish to address questions related to self-limiting insects and issues of North-South equity and technology facilitation, and in particular, emphasize the need for supporting capacity-building for multidisciplinary horizon scanning, assessment and monitoring of new developments in synthetic biology, as elaborated in Annex II of CBD/SBSSA/26/4.

6

ENSURE NO RELEASE OF HIGH RISK AND UNASSESSED SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY ORGANISMS, COMPONENTS OR PRODUCTS TAKES PLACE

Acknowledging the uncertainties and unanswered questions surrounding various specific organisms, components and products of synthetic biology that are apparent throughout the mAHTEG report, it is imperative that parties reaffirm the application of the precautionary approach. In the absence of robust liability and redress mechanisms, socioeconomic, ethical, and cultural impact assessments, and risk management procedures, Parties should ensure that at this time there is no release of engineered gene drive organisms, self-spreading vaccines for wildlife or organisms, components and products derived from the integration of artificial intelligence with synthetic biology. This stance aligns with Decision 14/19, the Cartagena Protocol, and the recommendations 23. and 24. set forth in Annex V of the mAHTEG report.

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