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AD HOC TECHNICAL EXPERT GROUP ON
SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY
Montreal, Canada, 21-25 September 2015

REPORT OF THE AD HOC TECHNICAL EXPERT GROUP ON SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

1. In paragraph 4 of its decision XII/24,[1] the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity decided to establish the Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group (AHTEG) on Synthetic Biology, with terms of reference contained in the annex to the decision.

2. In paragraphs 5 and 6 of the same decision, the Conference of the Parties invited Parties, other Governments, relevant organizations, indigenous and local communities and relevant stakeholders to submit information to the Executive Secretary relevant to the work of the AHTEG, as well as on measures undertaken in accordance with paragraph 3 of decision XII/24, including the identification of needs for guidance, and further information in response to paragraph 3(a) of decision XI/11.

3. Furthermore, in paragraph 7 of the same decision, the Conference of the Parties requested the Executive Secretary:

(a) To make available the information submitted by Parties, other Governments, relevant organizations, indigenous and local communities and relevant stakeholders through the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention and other means;

(b) To convene a moderated open-ended online forum[2] to support the work of the AHTEG in meeting its terms of reference;

(c) To prepare an updated report on the work specified in paragraphs 3(a), 3(b) and 3(c) of decision XI/11, taking into account information submitted in paragraph 2 above and a synthesis of the outcomes of the process mentioned in (b) above and to submit these for consideration by the AHTEG;

(d) To submit for consideration by a meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) prior to the thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, the peer-reviewed reports of the outcomes of the process mentioned in paragraphs (b) and (c) above.

[1] The full text of the decision can be found at http://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-12/cop-12-dec-24-en.pdf.

[2] The open-ended online forum will be open to all interested participants and continue for a finite period of time.

4. In response to paragraphs 5, 6 and 7(a) of the decision, the Executive Secretary sent out a notification inviting Parties, other Governments, relevant international organizations, indigenous and local communities and other relevant stakeholders to submit information on synthetic biology. A total of 30 submissions were received, of which 18 were from Parties, 1 from a non-Party and 11 from organizations. The submissions were made available through the Biosafety-Clearing House.[3]

5. Further, in response to paragraph 7(b) of the decision, the Executive Secretary invited the nomination of experts from Parties, other Governments, indigenous and local communities and relevant organizations to participate in the Open-ended Online Forum on Synthetic Biology and organized a series of moderated discussions from April to July 2015 in support of the work of the AHTEG.[4]

6. In response to paragraph 7(c) of the decision, the Executive Secretary prepared an updated report on the work done and a synthesis of the views expressed through the submissions in response to his notifications and to interventions made in the Open-ended Online Forum (UNEP/CBD/SYNBIO/AHTEG/2015/1/2).

7. In working towards achieving the outcomes described in decision XII/24, the AHTEG held its face-to-face meeting in Montreal, Canada, from 21 to 25 September 2015.[5] The list of participants is contained in the annex.

8. The members of the AHTEG were selected in accordance with the consolidated modus operandi of SBSTTA[6] and decision XII/24, from among the nominations submitted by Parties taking into consideration geographical distribution and gender; and on the basis of their active participation in the Open-ended Online Forum and with the approval of the SBSTTA Bureau. A limited number of experts nominated by other Governments and relevant organizations were also selected using the same criteria and approval process.

ITEM 1. OPENING OF THE MEETING

9. The meeting was opened at 9:30 a.m. on Monday, 21 September 2015, by Mr. Charles Gbedemah, on behalf of Mr. Braulio Dias, Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

10. In his opening remarks, Mr. Gbedemah welcomed the members of the AHTEG, emphasized the importance of the work of the Group and elaborated on the need to achieve the outcomes outlined in the terms of reference.

11. Mr. David Cooper, Head of the Division on Scientific Assessment and Monitoring, also welcomed the members of the Group and thanked them for bringing their expertise to the meeting and to the online discussions that had preceded the meeting. He noted that the outcomes of the meeting would be considered by SBSTTA at its twentieth meeting, to be held in Montreal, Canada, from 25 to 29 April 2016.

12. Following his opening remarks, Mr. Gbedemah invited the members of the AHTEG to introduce themselves briefly.

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[3] The submissions of information on synthetic biology are available online at http://bch.cbd.int/synbio/notifications/.

[4] The discussions under the Open-ended Online Forum on Synthetic Biology are available at http://bch.cbd.int/synbio/open-ended/discussion.shtml.

[5] With financial support from the European Union.

[6] Decision VIII/10 of the Conference of the Parties, annex III, para. 18.

ITEM 2. ORGANIZATIONAL MATTERS

2.1. Election of officers

13. The Group elected Mr. Martin Batič (Slovenia) Chair and Ms. Maria de Lourdes Torres (Ecuador) Rapporteur.

14. The Chair made an introductory statement in which he highlighted the importance of the task at hand and the challenges before the Group.

2.2. Adoption of the agenda

15. The Chair invited the Group to consider and adopt the provisional agenda (UNEP/CBD/SYNBIO/AHTEG/2015/1/1).

16. Following a proposal by the Chair, the Group agreed to consider the item "Towards an operational definition of synthetic biology comprising inclusion and exclusion criteria" as the first substantive item to be discussed and adopted the provisional agenda with this amendment.

2.3. Organization of work

17. The Group decided to proceed on the basis of the organization of work contained in annex II to the annotations to the agenda (UNEP/CBD/SYNBIO/AHTEG/2015/1/1/Add.1).

18. The Group also decided to work generally in plenary and to break into smaller groups only if it was deemed necessary.

ITEM 3. SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

19. Ms. Manoela Miranda of the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity provided an overview of the outcomes of the work of the Open-ended Online Forum on Synthetic Biology and introduced the background document (UNEP/CBD/SYNBIO/AHTEG/2015/1/2) to assist the Group in its deliberations on each of the substantive items.

3.1. Towards an operational definition of synthetic biology comprising inclusion and exclusion criteria

20. In its deliberations under the agenda item, the AHTEG recognized that synthetic biology is a broad term that refers to a wide range of disciplines, techniques, potential applications and end products, and has a degree of overlap with modern biotechnology.

21. It was also noted that an operational definition must be understood in the context of the objectives of the Convention[7] and that the purpose of such a definition is to assist Parties in their implementation of the provisions of the Convention.

22. In the light of the above, there was support for the development of an operational definition that would express the notions of both continuity and novelty in relation to modern biotechnology and would

[7] The objectives of the Convention are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources, including by appropriate access to genetic resources and by appropriate transfer of relevant technologies, taking into account all rights over those resources and to technologies, and by appropriate funding.

draw on elements from the text of the definition developed by three scientific committees of the European Commission[8] and included by the European Union in its response to the notification issued by the Secretariat inviting submissions on information relevant to the work of the AHTEG.[9]

23. Taking into account the deliberations of the AHTEG and the shared views of its members, the Chair proposed a draft operational definition for the consideration of the Group.

24. The following is the outcome of the deliberations of the Group on an operational definition of synthetic biology:

> "Synthetic biology is a further development and new dimension of modern biotechnology that combines science, technology and engineering to facilitate and accelerate the understanding, design, redesign, manufacture and/or modification of genetic materials, living organisms and biological systems."

3.2. Relationship between synthetic biology and biological diversity

25. Under the agenda item, the AHTEG took note of the exchange of views during the open-ended online discussions and the submissions[10] on how to address the relationship between synthetic biology and biological diversity.

26. In its deliberations, the Group highlighted several applications, such as bioenergy, agriculture, pharmaceuticals and chemical production, where organisms, components and products of synthetic biology may interact with biological diversity. Those applications, the Group noted, may have both positive and negative impacts on biological diversity at different levels, including genes, species and ecosystems.

27. In addressing the relationship between synthetic biology and biological diversity, the Group worked within the context of the operational definition agreed on and each of the specific three objectives of the Convention. It was noted that, in order to facilitate discussions on the relationship between synthetic biology and biological diversity, an appropriate baseline for measuring the potential positive and negative impacts of synthetic biology on each of the objectives of the Convention needs to be considered or developed and, where possible, supported by evidence-based information, including peer-reviewed data, as well as specialized knowledge, indigenous and traditional knowledge.

28. The AHTEG noted that the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources may be affected, both positively and negatively, by living organisms resulting from synthetic biology, as well as by non-living products or components.

29. On the one hand, some members of the AHTEG noted that there is a potentially higher level of uncertainty due to the increased depth of intervention of synthetic biology in living organisms and biological systems, and emphasized, in accordance with paragraph 3 of decision XII/24, the need for Governments to take a precautionary approach when addressing threats of significant reduction or loss of biological diversity posed by organisms, components and products resulting from synthetic biology, in

[8] SCENIHR, SCCS, SCHER (2014). Final Opinion on Synthetic Biology I Definition. Available at http://ec.europa.eu/health/scientific_committees/emerging/docs/scenihr_o_044.pdf.

[9] Notification SCBD/BS/CG/MPM/DA/84279 available at http://www.cbd.int/doc/notifications/2015/ntf-2015-013-synthetic-biology-en.pdf.

[10] Available at http://www.cbd.int/doc/notifications/2015/ntf-2015-013-synthetic-biology-en.pdf and http://bch.cbd.int/synbio/open-ended/discussion.shtml.

accordance with their domestic legislation and relevant international obligations. On the other hand, some members of the AHTEG noted that there are mechanisms built into existing risk assessment frameworks which take into account such uncertainties in a stepwise manner while building on past experience with the existing frameworks. In that context, those AHTEG members also noted that the nature of synthetic biology research and development may lead to more predictability in the characteristics of the resulting organism, thereby facilitating the risk assessment process and reducing uncertainty.

30. The AHTEG also noted that regulators and decision makers may face challenges in fully addressing the potential positive and negative impacts of synthetic biology on biodiversity due to the rate at which the technologies of synthetic biology are evolving. Another aspect of the relationship between synthetic biology and biological diversity that was noted was its potential positive and negative indirect effects, which also have to be taken into account in the adoption and use of organisms, products and components of synthetic biology in order to ensure that the sustainable use of biodiversity is maintained.

31. Within the context of Articles 15 and 16 of the Convention and the Nagoya Protocol, the AHTEG also took note of the fact that synthetic biology may have both positive and negative impacts on the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources. Some AHTEG members further noted the potential for the unequitable use of digital genetic information.

3.3. Similarities and differences between living modified organisms (as defined in the Cartagena Protocol) and organisms, components and products of synthetic biology techniques

32. In considering the agenda item, the AHTEG arrived at a common understanding that the term "components" would refer to parts used in a synthetic biology process (for example, a DNA molecule), and the term "products" would refer to the resulting output of a synthetic biology process (for example, a chemical substance). Both terms were considered as referring to non-living entities. On the basis of that understanding, the Group agreed that those non-living components and products of synthetic biology do not fall under the scope of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

33. The AHTEG deliberated on whether living organisms derived from synthetic biology fall under the scope of the Cartagena Protocol by considering both the similarities and the differences between living modified organisms (LMOs) and the living organisms developed through current and near-future applications of synthetic biology.

34. The AHTEG agreed that living organisms developed through current and near future applications of synthetic biology are similar to LMOs as defined in the Cartagena Protocol.

35. The AHTEG noted, however, that it is not clear at the current stage whether or not some organisms of synthetic biology, which are currently in the early stages of research and development, would fall under the definition of LMOs under the Cartagena Protocol.

36. It was also noted that there are cases in which there may be no consensus on whether the result of a synthetic biology application is "living" or not (for example, protocells).

3.4. Adequacy of other existing national, regional and/or international instruments to regulate the organisms, components or products derived from synthetic biology techniques

37. Under the agenda item, the AHTEG first examined the issues on whether the organisms, components and products of synthetic biology fall under the scope of existing laws and regulations,

whether the existing laws and regulations can adequately address the technology, and whether there are any gaps.

38. Following discussions under item 3.3, the AHTEG noted that living organisms, components and products of synthetic biology fall within the scope of the Convention and its three objectives. However, only living organisms of synthetic biology would fall under the scope of the Cartagena Protocol and the Nagoya-Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress.[11] It was therefore noted by some members of the AHTEG that many components and products of synthetic biology, while covered by the Convention, are not covered under the scope of the two Protocols and possibly not by some national biosafety frameworks either.

39. The Nagoya Protocol was noted as a relevant international instrument providing a framework for the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in synthetic biology. Nevertheless, the lack of clarity on how the provisions of Articles 15 and 16 of the Convention and the Nagoya Protocol apply, in practice, to synthetic biology was noted.

40. Some members of the AHTEG noted that products of synthetic biology fall under the scope of international, regional or national instruments addressing, among other things, chemicals, human pharmaceuticals and veterinary products. At the national level, while some AHTEG members considered the sectoral regulations in their countries adequate to address products of synthetic biology, other members considered such national legislation to be fragmented and/or lacking the necessary operational provisions.

41. Some members of the AHTEG noted the following needs with regard to international regimes: (a) provisions to address the socioeconomic impacts of the components and products of synthetic biology; (b) measures to minimize the likelihood of unintentional transboundary movements of organisms of synthetic biology after their release into the environment; and (c) traceability tools to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in synthetic biology.

42. Some members of the AHTEG noted that some countries have policies and regulations for controlling the exchange, distribution and commercialization of the products of modern biotechnology, which could also be applied to the non-living components of synthetic biology. Other members, however, did not consider the existing national legislation to be adequate for regulating the components of synthetic biology.

3.5. Potential benefits and risks of organisms, components and products arising from synthetic biology techniques to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and related human health and socioeconomic impacts relevant to the mandate of the Convention and its Protocols

43. Under the agenda item, the AHTEG considered the potential benefits and potential adverse effects[12] of organisms, components and products of synthetic biology within the mandate of the Convention and its Protocols, taking into account the information contained in the background document as well as submissions and interventions in the online forum.

[11] Once it enters into force.

[12] In line with the Cartagena Protocol, the AHTEG decided to use the term “potential adverse effects” rather than “risk” in the context of this agenda item.

44. In line with the agreed operational definition of synthetic biology, the AHTEG noted that the organisms, components and products of synthetic biology are expected to have similar positive and negative impacts on biological diversity as those of classical genetic engineering. However, the potential positive and negative impacts of synthetic biology may be broader and more wide-ranging due to the potential of synthetic biology to engineer more complex organisms and biological systems for use in a varied range of applications.

45. Members of the AHTEG noted that, in comparison with classical genetic engineering, a distinctive quality of synthetic biology is its rate and depth of intervention, which may lead to decreased familiarity of the organisms developed through synthetic biology in comparison with non-modified organisms. From an engineering perspective, synthetic biology aims at achieving more predictability in the characteristics of the resulting organism. However, the level of uncertainty in risk assessment may increase with regard to the impacts on biodiversity and human health as well as the time needed to complete the risk assessment.

46. Potential benefits as well as the potential adverse effects of synthetic biology applications need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, with an appropriate balance between reasoning based on evidence and forward-looking scenarios.

47. Furthermore, the relationship between synthetic biology and its ethical implications for societal views towards nature, as well as the relationship between mankind and ecosystems, were noted as cross-cutting issues with respect to all three objectives of the Convention.

48. The potential benefits and potential adverse effects associated with synthetic biology are dependent on the particular circumstances and context in which the application is used: for example, the country in which the technology is being applied, its ecosystem and the relevant production system.

49. With respect to the issue of potential benefits and potential adverse effects that may affect biological diversity, and, in particular, its sustainable use, the AHTEG noted that synthetic biology, due to its higher level of complexity, must be placed in the context of other ongoing developments and national strategies, such as existing strategies and approaches on bio-economy, biotechnology, agriculture and biodiversity.

50. The assessment of the potential benefits and potential adverse effects of synthetic biology is therefore challenged by the difficulty of distinguishing which socioeconomic changes result from the introduction of synthetic biology. Under such circumstances, it may be necessary to introduce appropriate methods from relevant scientific disciplines to take socioeconomic considerations into account.

51. Furthermore, the current and foreseeable future applications of synthetic biology being considered in the assessment of potential benefits and potential adverse effects are at various stages of development, ranging from the theoretical to early or active areas of research to those that are already on the market. Consequently, the timeframe within which the potential benefits and potential adverse effects associated with those applications may be realized would vary considerably.

52. The text box below contains illustrative examples of potential benefits and potential adverse effects grouped in accordance with the objectives of the Convention.

Potential benefits

A cross-cutting and key potential benefit of synthetic biology is the contribution to the understanding of biological systems from the molecular to the ecosystems level:

Objective 1: Conservation of biological diversity

(a) Medical and nutritional applications may lead to healthier populations, which is a pre-requisite for the conservation of biological diversity;

(b) Bioremediation may contribute to the restoration of ecosystems;

(c) Resistance or tolerance to various stresses, such as diseases and abiotic stresses, may contribute to species conservation;

(d) Agricultural and agroforestry applications with reduced chemical pesticide/herbicide use may lead to the conservation of pollinators and other non-target organisms;

Objective 2: Sustainable use of biological diversity

(e) Agricultural and agroforestry applications of synthetic biology, such as abiotic stress tolerance or micro-organisms modified for increased nitrogen fixation, may lead to restoring productivity of depleted agricultural land and to increased crop productivity on existing agricultural land;

(f) In the area of bioenergy applications that rely on synthetic biology, some models indicate a potential reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, which would contribute to mitigation of climate change and thereby to the sustainable use of biological diversity;

(g) Application of gene drive systems and other tools of synthetic biology to control agricultural pests and animal and human diseases may improve the sustainable use of biodiversity and human health;

(h) Using microorganisms produced through synthetic biology to utilize biomass waste from agriculture and/or forestry more efficiently. This may reduce reliance on natural environments or land-use for agriculture and forestry;

(i) Industrial applications of synthetic biology may lead to alternative methods to manufacture products, such as chemicals and other materials, which are currently produced from natural sources, thereby reducing the impacts associated with the extraction of natural resources;

Objective 3: Fair and equitable sharing of the benefits of biological diversity

(j) Provisions on the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources are covered in Articles 15 and 16 of the Convention and the Nagoya Protocol. The availability of synthetic biology may enable the fair and equitable sharing of benefits with relevant stakeholders in developing countries through greater access to the tools of synthetic biology, thereby facilitating the transfer of knowledge and technology.

Potential adverse effects

Potential adverse effects of synthetic biology with respect to conservation of biological diversity can result from direct and indirect, intended or unintended, as well as immediate or delayed effects. These effects may occur at the genetic, population, or ecosystem level. On this basis, the following examples of potential adverse effects were identified:

Objective 1: Conservation of biological diversity

(a) An engineered fitness advantage may lead to invasiveness;

(b) Enhanced gene flow that leads to loss of biodiversity;

(c) An increased pathogenic potential;

(d) Increased levels of toxic substances, which may lead to disruptive effects on soil, food-webs, and pollinators;

(e) Negative effects on non-target organisms, such as pollinators;

(f) Changes in organisms on the level of basic metabolic pathways, such as altered photosynthesis pathways, carbohydrate metabolism or nitrogen fixation, which, among other effects, may lead to changes in agricultural practice and land-use and may challenge risk assessment;

(g) Applications that are aimed at altering and replacing natural populations (for example, gene drive systems) may have adverse effects at the ecosystem level, and vis-à-vis the other two objectives of the Convention;

Objective 2: Sustainable use of biological diversity

(h) Increased demand for biomass crops, as well as changes in patterns of extraction of biomass, minerals and other sources of energy, may lead to changes in land use;

(i) Replacement of natural products may lead to changes in the agricultural practices of communities, which may adversely affect traditional crops, practices and livelihoods;

(j) Gene flow may lead to adverse effects on agrobiodiversity;

Objective 3: Equitable sharing of the benefits of biological diversity

(k) Loss of market share and income by indigenous and local communities due to the altered exploitation of genetic resources;

(l) A shift in the understanding of what constitutes a genetic resource and the implications thereof, such as the misappropriation of the original source of the DNA information and, consequently — if benefits are derived from the use of such DNA information without prior informed consent and mutually agreed terms — the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits would not be possible;

(m) Inappropriate access without benefit sharing due to the use of sequenced data without material transfer agreements under the Nagoya Protocol;

(n) Patent-driven and open-source approaches to synthetic biology may have different implications in the context of access and benefit sharing;

(o) Indigenous peoples and local communities will not necessarily support or benefit from the utilization of genetic resources in synthetic biology.

3.6. Best practices on risk assessment and monitoring regimes currently used by Parties to the Convention and other Governments

53. Under the agenda item, the AHTEG took into account the examples of best practices provided through the submissions of information13 and online discussions,14 and considered whether additional efforts are needed to compile information on best practices. The AHTEG also considered possible ways forward with regard to facilitating the sharing, dissemination and use of that information by Parties and other Governments.

54. The AHTEG noted that the examples of best practices provided through the submissions were primarily based on experiences with LMO risk assessment within the context of Annex 3 of the Cartagena Protocol.

55. The AHTEG concluded that it would be useful to compile the existing body of knowledge on relevant best practices on risk assessment and monitoring in a single and easily accessible online portal under, for example, the Biosafety-Clearing House of the Cartagena Protocol or the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention.

56. With regard to additional topics on which best practices may need to be complied, the AHTEG noted that best practices on the standardization of risk assessment methodologies and on monitoring are underrepresented, and an invitation for submissions of those topics would be useful.

3.7. Degree to which the existing arrangements constitute a comprehensive framework in order to address impacts of organisms, components and products resulting from synthetic biology, in particular threats of significant reduction or loss of biological diversity

57. Under the agenda item, the AHTEG agreed that, in order to be considered comprehensive, a framework should include arrangements that address the impacts of organisms, components and products of synthetic biology in the context of the three objectives of the Convention, in line with Article 8(g) and decision XII/24.

58. In considering the degree to which existing risk assessment principles and methodologies constitute a comprehensive framework to address the impact of organisms of synthetic biology, some members of the AHTEG noted that risk assessment practices currently in place to evaluate LMOs are sufficient and appropriate to evaluate organisms of synthetic biology, and could be modified to accommodate new specific considerations related to synthetic biology should the need arise.

59. Some members noted, however, that current risk assessment approaches and methodologies must be adapted to address matters that are of particular relevance to synthetic biology. Those members

[13] Available at http://www.cbd.int/doc/notifications/2015/ntf-2015-013-synthetic-biology-en.pdf.

[14] Available at http://bch.cbd.int/synbio/open-ended/discussion.shtml.

identified the lack of familiarity in comparison with non-modified organisms, challenges in establishing meaningful comparators, and possibly higher levels of uncertainty as gaps in the existing methodologies for assessing the environmental impacts of organisms of synthetic biology, and identified a need for guidelines and capacity-building to be developed and made available.

60. The views of the members of the AHTEG diverged with regard to whether or not current methodologies to address the environmental impacts of the components and products of synthetic biology are adequate or even needed.

61. With regard to the socioeconomic considerations of the impacts of synthetic biology on the three objectives of the Convention, some members of the Group noted that the issues are not sufficiently addressed by existing frameworks.

62. With regard to the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits of synthetic biology, some members of the AHTEG noted that there is no comprehensive framework to assess the added value of synthetic biology applications to society.

63. Some members of the AHTEG further noted the lack of relevant methodologies for integrating ethical values that are relevant to society in the assessment of the added value of synthetic biology applications.

64. The need for coordination with current processes under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety was noted, in particular with the AHTEG on Socio-economic Considerations and the AHTEG on Risk Assessment and Risk Management.

65. Some members of the AHTEG noted that the existing arrangements to address the impacts of organisms, components and products resulting from synthetic biology are fragmented and do not constitute a comprehensive framework.

ITEM 4. CONCLUSIONS AND WAYS FORWARD, INCLUDING ELEMENTS TO FACILITATE FUTURE DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIONS ON SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY UNDER THE CONVENTION

66. Reaffirming decision XII/24, in which the Conference of the Parties urged Parties and invited other Governments to take a precautionary approach in accordance with paragraph 4 of decision XI/11, and having deliberated on the tasks mandated by the Conference of the Parties, the AHTEG makes the following proposals on the ways forward for future actions on synthetic biology for consideration by the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice in formulating its recommendations to the Conference of the Parties:

(a) Consider the adoption of the operational definition of synthetic biology: “synthetic biology is a further development and new dimension of modern biotechnology that combines science, technology and engineering to facilitate and accelerate the understanding, design, redesign, manufacture and/or modification of genetic materials, living organisms and biological systems”;

(b) Take note of the conclusion of the AHTEG that living organisms developed through current and near future applications of synthetic biology are similar to LMOs as defined in the Cartagena Protocol;

(c) Establish a process to monitor and assess the state of knowledge within the field of synthetic biology on a regular basis, review new information regarding the positive and negative impacts

of synthetic biology vis-à-vis the three objectives of the Convention, and update the proposed operational definition as appropriate;

(d) Urge Parties to address synthetic biology in a coordinated manner within the context of the objectives of the Convention and its Protocols, particularly by tapping into existing processes, such as the AHTEG on Risk Assessment and Risk Management and the AHTEG on Socio-economic Considerations under the Cartagena Protocol;

(e) Coordinate and establish synergies with other United Nations and international organizations, whose mandates are relevant to synthetic biology, such as the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, including its Committee on World Food Security and Codex Alimentarius, the World Intellectual Property Organization, the World Organisation for Animal Health, the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Technology Facilitation Mechanism of the United Nations;

(f) Create or expand existing online platforms to facilitate knowledge and information sharing on risk assessment research, positive and negative impacts of synthetic biology through, among other things, the Biosafety-Clearing House or the clearing-house mechanism;

(g) Promote the use of online tools to facilitate work on synthetic biology in the context of the Convention and its Protocols;

(h) Promote capacity-building and encourage cooperation among Parties, other Governments and relevant organizations;

(i) Invite the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Nagoya Protocol to set up mechanisms for clarifying the issue of digital genetic resource information as it relates to access and benefit-sharing;

(j) Assess potential gaps in oversight under the Convention and its Protocols with regard to components and products of synthetic biology;

(k) Urge the Convention to promote the full engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities in future activities relating to synthetic biology;

(l) Promote engagement among Parties, other Governments and relevant stakeholders to discuss, among other things, the potential benefits and potential adverse effects of synthetic biology, the development of guidelines, public awareness, communication and education, and ethical considerations in the context of the three objectives of the Convention.

ITEM 5. OTHER MATTERS

67. Members of the AHTEG expressed appreciation to the Secretariat and the Chair for achieving the mandate of the Group successfully.

68. The AHTEG noted and expressed regret at the absence of representatives of indigenous peoples and local communities at the meeting.

ITEM 6. ADOPTION OF THE REPORT

69. The draft report was introduced to the Group by the Rapporteur. The Chair invited the Group to consider the report, which was adopted as orally amended.

ITEM 7. CLOSURE OF THE MEETING

70. The meeting closed on Friday, 25 September 2015, at 10:30 p.m.

Annex

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