



HM Government



Wilton Park



Report

Engaging public representatives in biosecurity and pandemic preparedness

Monday 8 – Friday 12 November 2021 | WP1995V

In association with:





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In association with Global Partnership against WMD, Global Affairs Canada, Africa CDC and NTI

This workshop, which was hosted by the Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (Global Partnership or GP) and Wilton Park in partnership with the African Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) and representatives from South Africa, aimed to advance the Signature Initiative to Mitigate Biological Threats in Africa. The focus of the event was on advancing and strengthening South Africa's biosafety and biosecurity. Overall objectives of the workshop were: (i) developing commonly understood methods for preventing accidental and deliberate outbreaks, (ii) enabling implementation of the Africa CDC Biosafety and Biosecurity Legislative Framework, (iii) advocating for a Regional Training and Certification Program for Biosafety and Biosecurity Experts, (iv) identifying possible barriers to data and information sharing, (v) building strong multi-sectoral Southern African leadership for natural, accidental, or deliberate biological events. The workshop was held from November 9th to November 12th 2021, and followed a high-level open session on November 8. The workshop addressed four core thematic priorities, which frame this summary; i) Africa CDC's Initiative on Biosafety & Biosecurity, ii) Epidemic Intelligence, iii) Innovation & the Bioeconomy, and iv) Non-proliferation.

Africa CDC's Initiative in Biosafety and Biosecurity

1. Compliance with and full and effective implementation of the revised International Health Regulations (2005), the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC), and United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1540 requires a series of regulatory and legislative instruments and capacities, which are at once distinct and overlapping. To support translation of instruments and knowledge across Africa, the Africa CDC's Biosafety & Biosecurity initiative has been established. Activities have included, inter alia: drafting a Legal Framework, which has been championed by 25 members states; development of Africa CDC's Regional Priorities and 5-year strategic plan, which included establishment of five regional Technical Working Groups; and setting up a Regional Training and Certification Program. The Legal Framework is currently under consideration within the African Union and will require considerable stakeholder engagement to ensure representativeness and implementation.
2. The success of the initiative relying on engagement of stakeholders and legislatures across Africa raised a number of questions. First, the need to associate legislative and regulatory instruments with a building of laboratory capacity in the Africa region

was highlighted. Second, political structures will need to be borne in mind to ensure that different extents of devolution (particularly in Federal systems) do not create fragmentation of implementation within member states. Third, it is important to note that much of this work is already taking place within countries and that often there is a need simply to fill gaps and benchmark rather than provide completely de novo legislative systems. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a concerted effort will be required to build and maintain the requisite political will through competent activism and defining why this should be an ongoing priority for African legislatures.

Advanced warning systems, epidemic intelligence, and resilience

3. This topic emphasised the centrality of data in decision-making during (and in the immediate phase prior to) an outbreak and the importance of local collaboration and trust in epidemic surveillance. Participants recognised the importance of WHO's new Hub for Pandemic and Epidemic Intelligence to be led by Dr Chikwe Ihekweazu (formerly Director of Nigeria CDC), which aims to build a multisectoral collaborative system of intelligence for better data, analytics, and decision-making. Common to discussions across the sessions was a recognition of the importance of interdisciplinary and local community collaboration in ensuring that data is accurate, understood, and valued. Importantly, those involved in data collection should both understand its value and benefit from its use; these systems should not be extractive.
4. To achieve this, example could be taken from the South African Covid-19 response which leveraged an existing provincial data centre which allowed linking of individual patient records and real time lab data to produce daily data at the level of neighbourhoods. This also enabled more personalised monitoring of those who are self-isolating through tailored support and delivery of medicines. It was recognized, however, that there are data privacy concerns and questions of building trust in these systems and the individuals with access to data. To do this requires working with communities prior to interventions and use of multi-stakeholder, multi-directional deliberative processes which build communities' literacy around their data and rights, as well as integrating quantitative and qualitative data. A key open question here is how these different data and knowledge are integrated together in a way which does not privilege one set of data or knowledge over others.

Innovations in pandemic response countermeasures and the bioeconomy

5. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, building capacity in Africa for research and innovation is paramount to securing medical countermeasures for African citizens. To do so, it is recognised that the imperative is to build on existing capacity and infrastructure in Africa as well as invest in the building of more than just transient capacity (viz Ebola diagnostic capabilities in 2015) but real technology transfer and sustained infrastructure. Exemplar here is the bioeconomy strategy of South Africa which establishes a new biotechnology cluster to support industry and fund development of COVID-19 diagnostics (among others). This effort operates through partnerships, collaboration and the creation of local intellectual property to spur development.
6. Equally, there must be an emphasis in all these activities for responsible research and innovation. In the first instance, the Tianjin Biosecurity Guidelines were highlighted as a basis for regulation and oversight of good biosafety and biosecurity practice in Africa. This was further highlighted by a note that much of the work on how to create responsible cultures and regulate biotechnology products has been done elsewhere and lessons can be learned. In these cases, ongoing research governance processes at both an institutional and state level are needed to ensure that good scientific practice is not just a part of research training but an integral part of daily conduct. Importantly, this will require investments over and above that of technical capacity for BSL-3/4 laboratories to ensure, for example, the continued

functioning of ethics committees, policy renewal processes, and the embedding of incentives and disincentives for good research conduct.

Nonproliferation

7. The discussions around non-proliferation in this meeting revolved primarily around the need to balance and consider both the benefits and risks of biotechnology. It was recognised that often the non-proliferation community focuses exclusively on potential harms without sufficient recognition of the benefits. Article X of the BTWC, the work of UNSCR 1540 and other biological non-proliferation mechanisms all include an element of development of capacity to ensure better detection and recognition of the trade-offs of biorisk and bioeconomy.

Summary

8. Throughout the week-long conference there was sustained emphasis on the need for coordinated action. In this regard, a set of Six Principles for Strengthening Biological Security in Africa were issued, to guide Signature Initiative efforts to build impactful and sustainable biosecurity, biosafety and biological risk management capabilities in and for Africa.
9. The meeting closed with discussions of calls to action to achieve the vision of the workshop. A core issue was raised about the need for sustainable institutions to address the transience of individual champions and maintain longer-term institutional memory. It was broadly recognised that collaboration and open dialogue are the ways forward and that Covid-19 has exacerbated inequalities, but has also highlighted the importance of biorisk to a broader audience. This window of opportunity that has been created by COVID-19 must be used to ensure that the necessary actions are taken now and that advocacy acts quickly and effectively to maintain focus and attention on building a more biosecure Africa.

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