

CLOSING REMARKS

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We have had a very full and fruitful day. During our discussions I have been busy scribbling down as much as I could. These remarks provide my personal summary of: what we have heard; our efforts to complete the stated aim of this meeting; and how this all relates to Malawi.

What we have heard - About the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)

This morning, our speakers explained that the BWC enshrines the fundamental norm against biological weapons and detailed how this treaty underpins international peace and security.

But we also heard that the BWC deals with other issues in addition to traditional security concepts – there is a balance in its relevance to public, animal and plant health, as well as environmental issues.

We have also talked about the spectrum of biological risks. Our speakers during the first sessions presented a need to: improve capacity to tackle natural disease; strengthen healthcare systems to protect and respond to disease events, irrespective of their cause; and to go further than just basic public health capacity to be able to deal with specific, specialised issues such as deliberate disease.

A number of our presentations covered aspects of biological weapons themselves. We have been told that biological weapons pose a different type of threat; that there have been few occasions of their actual use (and here I cannot resist taking the opportunity to suggest that joining the BWC would be one way to help ensure that this remains the case); that both the life sciences and biological resources can be used for both malign and beneficial purposes and that it is often difficult to differentiate between the two; that new scientific and technological developments can lead to new types of threat; and that the threat these weapons pose is truly international – ‘disease knows no borders’.

Our discussions, however, went further than this – they also looked at the international communities response to this threat – especially as it relates to the BWC. I would also like to take this opportunity to point out that the BWC processes are now pretty uncontroversial. Everyone seems to agree that biological weapons are bad. It is not a question of whether they should be banned but more a question of the best way to go about it. Is it possible that you have heard so little about these issues before today because this issue does not carry the political baggage of other weapons issues?

We have heard about the BWC’s: obligations and provisions – that it is an international agreement to take national action; its history – up to an including universalization efforts such as the one we are gathered here for today; its role as a framework to protect against ‘bad’ biology through a networked approach – a framework that includes legislative, oversight and monitoring, enforcement,

transparency and information sharing, as well as outreach and awareness raising elements; the importance of cooperation for the peaceful uses of the life sciences, the importance that this has for scientific and technological development, and through this the positive impact on health capacity; and the many opportunities to exchange information, experience and best practice.

What we have achieved – Common themes in our Discussions

At the very start of this meeting we were told that its aim was to build support for Malawi to ratify the BWC. Using this as a yardstick, I believe that our meeting has been a great success. As soon as we introduced ourselves this morning, it was clear we were going to do very well – the number of ministries, organisations and sectors of society was impressive and demonstrated the seriousness of the topics at hand. Our discussions throughout the day built on this promising start and we have repeatedly heard comments that tie Malawi to the aims and objectives of the BWC. We have heard that Malawi is a peace loving country, one that supports international efforts to strengthen peace and security, one that does not possess and is not interested in biological weapons. We know that Malawi has already signed this treaty. We have heard that what is needed now is to jump-start the ratification process and bring it back on to the national agenda. The question is how do we do this?

Our discussions provide us at least a partial answer to this question – there have been at least six recurring themes throughout the day. These, I believe, point the way to what has to happen after this meeting is over, the tables are all packed away and we all go back to our day jobs:

The need to build domestic stakeholder ownership

Throughout the day, we have heard of the importance of engaging and ensuring buy-in from: government ministries; parliamentarians; health officials; scientists, universities and research institutions; as well as other aspects of civil society.

The need to raise awareness

We have heard today of a lack of awareness of the issues we have been discussing. Several speakers have described the benefits of awareness raising for biological weapons issues and the BWC across all sectors of the country. Our discussions picked up the importance of mainstreaming this issue.

The importance of coordinating national activities

We have heard that if be effective and efficient national efforts must be well coordinated. We have heard of successes reached through the creation of national authorities, we have also talked about alternative approaches to take advantage of existing inter-ministry mechanisms. There is a clear role here for representatives of government and parliamentarians.

The importance of taking advantage of resources available outside of government

We have heard that the issues around biological weapons require a collective response from all stakeholders. We have also heard of important roles that stakeholders outside of government can play – whether this is using scientists to assist with the ethical and moral dimensions we have discussed, or taking advantage of civil society organisations to build on public outreach efforts.

The role of national champions

If our discussions here today are to be fruitful in the long term, as we have heard we must find a way to retain focus on these issues after this event is over. There are many competing priorities for all our attention, so continuing interest on this topic will require dedicated people, who believe in its value, to champion its causes. I hope that after our discussions here today that you are now all convinced in the value of addressing these issues and will act as its champions.

The need for support and assistance

Throughout the day, we have heard that greater capacity will be required for: drafting and adopting legislation; for its implementation, in case of the use of a biological weapon; strengthening health capacity; and for improving biosafety and biosecurity. Such assistance can come from internal sources – we have heard about the values of different approaches, such as getting each of the stakeholder ministries to include relevant items on their budgets (rather than just the lead ministry). Support can also be found within the region – your regional partners will have resources and experience that you need, and equally your will have resources and experience that they want. Support and assistance can also be found from the international community – from multilateral setting, from bilateral arrangements and from international organisations. Resources do exist to provide help across all of the areas we have talked about. It might be easier to access these resources if Malawi was a member of the BWC.

Why we should continue to work on this – the relevance of this workshop to Malawi

The various presentations we have heard today, as well as our discussions that followed them touched, time and time again, on why this is all an issue that is of relevance to Malawi and one that should be placed on the national agenda. As a conclusion to my remarks, I will summarise those that I managed to jot down:

- This region is not a stranger to biological weapons – we have heard that at least one state in the regional has had an offensive weapons programme; that there have allegations of use in the region, and that there indications of international terrorist activity.
- Protection of biological resources – we have heard how Malawi is blessed with many biological resources and the importance of protecting these – not only against their possible as weapons but as part of a larger intellectual property issue.

- The trans-national nature of the threat – we have heard that the nature of biological weapons means that they pose a threat to everyone; that no country, no matter how developed or how many resources it has, can protect itself against all the possible permutations of the biological weapons threat; that disease naturally spreads across borders; and that the international nature of the threat requires an international response. The question now is, whether Malawi wants to be part of the solution?
- The need for an all hazards approach – our discussions of the biological risk spectrum and the interoperability of measures to deal with deliberate and natural disease places this as an extension of efforts to strengthen national health capacity and deal with environmental issues – both of which already feature heavily on Malawi’s national agenda.
- Finally, the message – in my presentation this morning, I suggested that joining the BWC was a win/win situations and gave you a few reasons why. So what would not joining be? What message does Malawi send to the international community by staying outside of the BWC? Joining the BWC makes a definitive statement, all of which we have heard said today – that Malawi does not have biological weapons, that Malawi does not want biological weapons, that Malawi arrest and prosecute anyone else that tries to misuse its territory to acquire or use these weapons, and that Malawi believes that the life sciences should be used solely for humanities benefit. Surely these are all things that Malawi believes in and this is the message that Malawi should be sending to the international community.

On the basis of all of this, I would encourage you all, to do what you can, to ensure that Malawi ratifies the BWC as soon as possible.

Thank you all very much for your attention.
