

*Knowing is not enough,*

*We must apply.*

*Willing is not enough,*

*We must do.*

*J. W. von Goethe*

## **A culture collections' voice at the United Nations**

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The Seventh Review Conference of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, BTWC, took place at the UN, Geneva, 05-22 December 2011, under the leading motto of Goethe's words.

This 7<sup>th</sup> RevCon was – as some delegates pointed out - the first one with quite an open atmosphere enabling the UN States Delegations to articulate their expectations concerning the sustainable success for the BTWC and for better verification mechanisms. Currently, 171 States are signatories to the Convention, 16 countries are yet to ratify and 23 states are non-signatories (see <http://www.opbw.org/>). Each year, there is an expert conference and a Delegates conference on the BTWC. So, the BTWC is constantly monitored. The main BTWC focuses are potential bio-weapons state programmes and potential terrorist attacks by non-state actors. The 6<sup>th</sup> RevCon was in 2006. All previous RevCons had been unsuccessful: the effectiveness of the BTWC remains incomparable to the Chemical Weapons Convention. The 7<sup>th</sup> RevCon was the first one giving selected NGOs the chance to make statements, also, for the first time the President (currently, Paul van den Jissel) invited the NGOs to a special closed session to hear their impressions on the 7<sup>th</sup> RevCon. He stressed that NGOs need more room in the future as, too important are their missions and too valuable what they postulate.

It was a great honour for the BRC community to be selected as one of eighteen NGO speakers to give an official statement; through the umbrella of GBRCN, the Global Biological Resource Centre Network, the Biosecurity Code of Conduct (CoC), elaborated by an EMbaRC/GBRCN working group and agreed by EMbaRC and GBRCN members at the Utrecht Workshop in September 2011, was presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> RevCon as a model Biosecurity CoC with high outreach potential and a long-lasting impetus. Repeatedly, State Delegates mentioned the key role of Codes of Conduct, along with awareness raising and confidence building measures; the CoC for BRCs as presented was well received by the RevCon.

The weakness of the BTWC is that verification mechanisms are missing (e.g., no lists); the BTWC is an international convention without true power. We went to the UN to help strengthen the BTWC, to encourage State Delegates to take back home the CoC as a model and to start top-down processes in their countries to implement verification, involving their respective authorities and national legal enforcement mechanisms. Kathryn Nixdorff, a renowned BTWC expert, stressed that Codes of Conduct have outstanding importance in the bio-scientific world, they are the only way to strengthen the BTWC, keeping the dual-use dilemma in mind.

The Biosecurity CoC that we presented to the international States community was seemingly accepted with positive astonishment with the comment “how brief it seems”.

The 7<sup>th</sup> RevCon was finished on 22nd December and we expect detailed reports in due course of time through the unog website ([www.unog.ch](http://www.unog.ch)).

The UN are the most honourable forum for the Biosecurity CoC from which to get deserved acknowledgement, an important (and unexpected!) milestone. It is now most important that the culture collections adopt the CoC. Together with the Code itself, a background document on the development of the CoC has been written. Furthermore, a procedural practical document is under development that will be a compilation of “step-by-steps” guidance on how to implement the CoC in the daily life of collections – though no others know it better than culture collections. The key issues will be biorisk management, raising awareness, reporting misuse, internal and external communication, research and sharing knowledge, accessibility, supply, shipment and transport.

Moving on from the inaugural EMbaRC/GBRCN working group meeting to develop a Biosecurity CoC in October 2010, Braunschweig; a workshop in September 2011, Utrecht; the presentation via NGO Statement in December 2011, Geneva, we should use the WFCC as the main forum to discuss further steps on how to implement the CoC. What is the next milestone? We anticipate a process being initiated by UN State Delegations but they expect that all culture collections implement the CoC.

The Biosecurity Code of Conduct for BRCs and the accompanying document can be found via <http://www.embarc.eu/biosecurity.html>.