Providing Regional IT Advisor Service in Biosafety Information and Education: Experiences In Asia-Pacific

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Abstract

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as one of the implementing agencies of the Global Environment Facilities (GEF) is implementing a project for Building Capacity for Effective Participation in the Biosafety Clearing House (BCH). The BCH is an information exchange mechanism established by the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) to assist Parties to implement its provisions and to facilitate sharing of information on, and experience with, living modified organisms (LMOs). The BCH is critical to the implementation of the protocol as it is intended to be a repository of up-to-date information on LMOs and biosafety in order to assist decision-making in countries around the world as well as civil society and the biotechnology industry.

The project assists countries to participate in the BCH by building human and institutional capacity and by providing countries with the minimum equipment required for the national participation in the BCH. Among others, countries are being offered and provided hands-on assistance by Regional Advisors in assessing and analyzing training needs and offering appropriate technical assistance in using and benefiting fully from the national BCH.

This paper presents the overview of the BCH as well as the experiences of the author, as a Regional IT Advisor himself, in providing IT advisory towards the development and implementation of national BCH, particularly in some Asia-Pacific Countries. It highlights the various types of assistance provided and their implications for having an effective national BCH- an important step towards providing countries with the opportunities to participate in the safe use of biotechnology.

Keywords: BCH Regional Advisor, Regional IT Advisor, Biosafety Clearing House, Capacity Building, UNEP-GEF-BCH Project

Introduction

The United Nations Environment Programme as one of the implementing agencies of the Global Environment Facilities (GEF) is implementing a project for Building Capacity for Effective Participation in the Biosafety Clearing House. The project assists eligible countries to participate in the BCH by building human and institutional capacity and by providing countries with the minimum equipment required for the national participation in the BCH. Among others, countries are being offered and provided hands-on assistance by Regional Advisors in assessing and analyzing training needs and offering appropriate technical assistance in using and benefiting fully from the national BCH.
The Biosafety Clearing House: Up Close

The Biosafety Clearing House (BCH) is an information exchange mechanism established by the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to assist Parties to implement its provisions and to facilitate sharing of information on, and experience with, living modified organisms (LMOs). Article 20, paragraph 1 of the Protocol established the BCH as part of the clearing-house mechanism of the Convention on Biological Diversity, in order to:

- Facilitate the exchange of scientific, technical, environment and legal information on and experience with, living modified organisms; and
- Assist Parties to implement the Protocol, taking into account the special needs of developing country Parties, in particular the least developed and small island developing States among them, and countries with economies in transition as well as centres of origin and centres of genetic diversity.

The BCH is essential for the successful implementation of the Protocol by way of assisting parties and other stakeholders in different ways. As an example, the BCH serves as a “one-stop-shop” where users can readily access or contribute biosafety related information. In effect, this could assist Government to make informed decisions regarding the importation or release of LMOs. The timeliness and accuracy of information in the BCH are ensured since the users themselves are the ones who own and update them. (SCBD, 2004)

In particular, the following are some of the benefits that may be derived from using the BCH:

- access information about the national laws, regulations and guidelines of other Parties; and other countries decisions and assessments relating to specific LMOs;
- ensure that all potential exporters of LMOs to their country or those who wish to transport LMOs across their territory, are aware of national regulatory requirements;
- access information about capacity-building and other assistance available to support implementation of the Protocol;
- ensure that the relevant authorities in other countries can quickly find out who to inform in the event of an accidental movement of LMOs into their territory.

The BCH Central Portal (http://bch.cbd.int) serves as a gateway to all sections of the BCH, including the search pages, the Management Centre where information is entered or updated, link to other relevant websites, and the toolkit that help users to understand how to use the BCH. The BCH functions like a “central information marketplace” where the providers and users of biosafety information interact and exchange that information in a transparent manner. To facilitate this, the BCH has been designed to make “finding” and “providing information” as clear and intuitive as possible, like providing common formats and standardized terminology called “controlled vocabulary”. The BCH website is also available in six UN official languages. The Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (SCBD) manages and hosts the central portal of the BCH.

Alongside with the benefits that countries could derive from the BCH, the Parties to the Protocol have also obligations to post the necessary information on the BCH central portal. The
notification from the SCBD gives the requirements that need to be fulfilled as of the date of entry into force of the CPB. Therefore, it is imperative that all countries have the basic infrastructure and technical capacity, including equipment, tools and practical know-how to fulfill their obligations and to take advantage of the benefits of the BCH. (UNEP-GEF-BCH, 2005)

There are several ways by which a country can make information available to the BCH. The SCBD has proposed the following options (UNEP-GEF Biosafety Project Training Module No. 5, April 2007):

1. Offline Access – Non Internet/computer Option
2. Registering Information on the Central Portal Using the Management Centre
3. Registering Data Using Database Templates Locally and Send Data to the Central Portal
4. Make Data Available Through a Website and Allow the Central Portal to Retrieve it
5. Store Data on the National BCH and Actively Make that Data Available Through the Central Portal Using BCH Interoperability Standards.

The UNEP-GEF Project on Building Capacity for Effective Participation in Biosafety Clearing House

In response to the urgent needs of Parties to use and participate in the BCH, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) approved in March 2004 a new UNEP-GEF project entitled “Building Capacity for Effective Participation in the Biosafety Clearing House (BCH) of the Cartagena Protocol. The project serves as an add-on to the UNEP-GEF Project for Development of National Biosafety Frameworks and as a direct response to the needs of these countries for access and management of the BCH and in close collaboration with the SCBD. (UNEP-GEF Biosafety, 2004)

Specifically, the project intends to a) assist countries with how to enter the required data into the BCH, how to set-up their national BCH system and how to use BCH; and b) assist stakeholders who will either be required to use the BCH to enter country information and/or search information on the BCH to support decision-making.

The UNEP-GEF Biosafety Unit, based in Geneva, Switzerland provides the participating countries with easy-to-use training materials and access to applications developed by some governments such as Canada, Switzerland and USA. These tools are widely available to all countries and stakeholders thus enabling them to learn more about the BCH including their obligations. Aside from training materials, the project also provide where required the equipment (hardware and software) for countries to set-up their national BCH system. The setting-up of National BCH, however is based on the options described under the BCH overview section of this paper. However, countries that have already received equipment under the UNEP-GEF project for Development of National Biosafety Frameworks, needs to be assessed first in terms of the need for additional equipment or software.

In addition to training materials and equipment, the UNEP-GEF Biosafety Unit has also recruited and provides services of regional experts to countries, on a retainer basis. The UNEP-GEF, CBD Secretariat, Capacity Building International Organization of Germany, and
At the country level, the nBCH project comprises the institutional structure namely: National Executing Agency (NEA); NEA Focal Point (NFP) responsible for the BCH Project; Biosafety Clearing House Task Force (BCH TF); Biosafety Clearing House Focal Point (BCH FP); and the National Data Entry and/or Information Technology staff. These comprise human resources who have met some suggested criteria to hold said posts in the national BCH structure. This human resource complement of the country collaborates with the UNEP-GEF-Biosafety Unit for the BCH project together with the Regional Advisors when requested.

Overview of the BCH Regional Advisor Service

The BCH Regional Advisors are specialists in either Information Technology or the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and have been selected through a rigorous screening process by a Panel that included representatives of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the Science and Technical Advisory Panel (STAP) of the GEF, and members of the UNEP-GEF Biosafety Unit and the SCBD.

In particular, the Regional Advisors provide assistance to countries by helping in:

- Making the choice for type and style of national participation in the BCH
- Delivering training activities with national counterparts to train participants in the use and access of the BCH;
- Setting-up and making the chosen method of national BCH access operational;
- Developing a sustainable strategy;
- Training National Focal Points; and
- Negotiating costs of setting up the BCH

To request for such a service, countries need to provide a short description of the work required by the Advisor. The services of a Regional Advisor may be availed of at different times under the BCH project cycle which consists of the following steps:

Step 1. Establishing BCH Task Force and Gathering Information for the National BCH System
Step 2. Signing the Memorandum of Understanding and Receiving Funds
Step 3. Setting up National BCH System and Testing
Step 4. Training and National Workshop on the nBCH System
Step 5. Closing the Project

Providing Regional IT Advisory Service: Experiences in Asia-Pacific

The author of this paper had the opportunity to provide assistance of various scope and nature to different countries in the Asia-Pacific region ranging from the initial step of negotiating for the Memorandum of Understanding, facilitating introductory and stakeholders workshops,
training on the use of BCH, setting-up the national BCH system and up to project closing. As of this date, there are five types of UNEP-GEF-BCH Regional IT Advisory Missions accomplished in three countries in the region namely, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Royal Kingdom of Bhutan and Kingdom of Tonga from the period April to August of 2007. Another mission will be served on the second week of November, this time in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

This section of the paper highlights the experiences of the author in performing his role of providing the much needed assistance to build the capacities of countries in the region towards participating in the BCH. This in effect redounds to the countries reaping the benefits from using the BCH and more importantly, meeting their respective obligations to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

Regional IT Advisory Service in Lao People’s Democratic Republic

The regional IT advisory services in Lao PDR were facilitated in three workshops held on April 9-11, July 11-12 and August 22-23, 2007 at the Science Technology and Environment Agency (STEA), Vientiane, Lao, PDR.

The training-workshops were aimed at introducing the Lao, PDR BCH Task Force Members to the Cartegena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) and training them on the use of Biosafety Clearing House Central Portal to include the following:

The experience in Lao is deemed significant on the part of the author having been chosen to provide technical assistance for three out of its four workshops. While the first three workshops conducted for the Lao, PDR BCH Task Force were focused on fully understanding the nature and scope of the BCH to include the benefits and obligations, and use of the BCH Central Portal, the fourth and last workshop generally aimed to make the participants have an advanced understanding of the use and functionalities of the BCH Central Portal.

Workshop on Finalization of MOU: Experience in the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan

The mission call for the Royal Government of Bhutan held on July 23-24, 2007 is generally aimed at assisting the country in finalizing the Memorandum of Understanding. At the end of the mission, the key persons in-charge of the BCH project were able to:

- Be aware on the scope and description of the BCH Project
- Understand the phases of the BCH Capacity Building Project Operational Manual Contents
- Find procedures, resources and information on the BCH Project Operational Manual
- Understand the purpose of the Memorandum of Understanding
- Understand the requirements to fulfill all the forms that are described in the Operational Manual and their relationship with the MOU and
- Prepare the final draft of the MOU for the project.

Looking back at the mission’s general objective of assisting the NEC in finalizing its MOU for the BCH project, it is concluded that the specific objectives set thereto to support
such general objective have been achieved. More importantly, it may be noted and emphasized that the needed revisions in the draft MOU have been done and issues/concerns raised clarified.

Stakeholders’ Workshop on BCH for the Kingdom of Tonga

The mission in the Kingdom of Tonga held on August 7-10, 2007 is basically aimed at providing the stakeholders’ meeting-workshop participants with basic information on the biosafety clearing house (BCH). Specifically, this mission hoped to: a) raise awareness on the establishment, use and benefits of/from a nBCH; inform national stakeholders of objectives and provisions of nBCH project; b) seek input into objectives of nBCH; and c) provide initial information on the maintenance and access to the BCH central portal. There were a total of 20 participants who came from different line government ministries and non-government organizations in Tonga.

After all the presentations and hands-on exercises were concluded, a stakeholders’ consultation was facilitated with the workshop participants requested to articulate/share their thoughts on what issues/concerns that need to be addressed/looked at in relation to the BCH project implementation in the Kingdom of Tonga.

Introductory Workshop on BCH-Kingdom of Jordan

The author provided technical assistance to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Biosafety Clearing House (BCH) project for its introductory workshop held on 13 to 15 November 2007. As in previous missions, this mission to Jordan generally aimed at introducing the participants to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (CPB) and the scope, features and functionalities of Biosafety Clearing House (BCH). Specifically, the mission was carried out through:

1. Coordination and consultation with the NEA of Jordan through its BCH Focal Point for the preparation of workshop agenda
2. Preparation of materials needed for the workshop especially those dealing with introductory information on biosafety, CPB and BCH
3. Assistance and complementation with the BCH Regional Advisor
4. Providing insights, lessons learned and recommendation for future action.

This workshop was facilitated in partnership with a Regional CPB Advisor from Lebanon.
First Training Workshop for Sri Lanka BCH Task Force

The First Training Workshop for the Sri Lanka BCH Task Force was organized in Colombo (Ceylon Continental Hotel) during 28-31 April, 2008 so as to make them understand, inter alia, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, the Biosafety Clearing House and information sharing among the relevant stakeholders. The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources conducted the workshop in collaboration with South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme (SACEP), UNESCO and UNEP-GEF. The objectives of the workshop were:

1) To enrich the understanding on Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety
2) To enhance capacity of relevant agencies on information sharing and management
3) To facilitate in implementing the national biosafety framework
4) To assist in setting-up BCH access
5) To train BCH Task Force Personnel
6) To create enabling environment for sustainability
7) To enabling the participants in finding information, data entry in to the BCH etc in order to comply with the Protocol.

There were 32 participants from BCH Task Force members, government officials, scientists, and representatives from state universities, and the private sector. This workshop was facilitated by the author with a Regional CPB Advisor from India.

Lessons Learned and Conclusions

In the process of providing intervention to build the country capacity to effectively participate into the BCH through the provision of advisory and technical assistance with training, consultation and workshop as modalities, the following lessons were specifically drawn from the workshops facilitated:

- In preparing for the workshop, a considerable amount of time should be spent, specifically focusing on pre-workshop coordination such as agenda formulation and ensuring that training materials are adequate, among others. With the lessons learned in the workshops, the country BCH teams now work with ease in dealing with the project cycle depending on which stage they belong (i.e. MOU finalization, stakeholders’ orientation etc.) This may indicate that the UNEP-GEF through the intervention of the Regional Advisor becomes successful in transferring not only the technology to manage the country’s BCH system but the manner of coordinating and managing capacity building such as training workshop as well.

- As the series of training-workshop progresses, issues and concerns on how to effectively customize the training-workshop (i.e. materials, manner of delivering the presentation, etc) are being addressed slowly but surely. Suggestions and recommendations made during the previous workshops serve as key considerations in crafting the agenda for the succeeding workshops. This further indicates that getting feedback from the participant/stakeholders every end of the day through the workshop navigation meeting technique, is indeed at very effective tool to document things that should be looked at for immediate adjustments of training-workshop methodologies and approaches.
The IT infrastructure when properly set up provides a conducive environment for learning. On the other side, the internet connection which is a primary consideration for implementing the project should be given utmost importance, making it more reliable and consistent in providing the necessary technological back-up.

The actual training workshop when attended by a Regional Advisor provides an opportunity for visual confirmation of equipment (e.g. computers, LCD projector) bought for the BCH project and how they are utilized for said project.

Lastly, the support provided by the host country, SCBD, the UNEP-GEF-BCH project team, and the travel firm provided the much-needed lifeblood before and during and after the conduct of the intervention.

It may therefore be concluded that given the experiences, lessons learned and implications highlighted, the Regional Advisor service when availed of by countries significantly contribute, among others, to fully understanding the benefits, obligations and technology behind the use of BCH in fulfillment of their obligation to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety. More importantly, the essence of such an intervention is deemed at the level of providing an effective and efficient channel or link between the Parties and the UNEP-GEF-BCH project management office in Geneva, Switzerland and other relevant stakeholders and institutions.

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