**Briefing note**

**Online Forum and AHTEG on synthetic biology**

**Context**

The Convention on Biological Diversity began discussing the issue of synthetic biology in 2012. Two years later, at the 12th meeting of the Convention, the member states (countries) decided to create an expert group to investigate the issue further. The group, called the AHTEG, worked online and in person to prepare a report on various aspects related to synthetic biology. To enable stakeholder engagement and sharing of knowledge on synthetic biology, the work of the AHTEG was preceded by an online forum.

In December 2016, at its 13th meeting, the CBD examined the report presented by the AHTEG. Many parties felt the topic needed further discussion and some raised the topic of gene drive as an issue that required dedicated and focused attention. Some, with the support of an NGO coalition called "CBD Alliance", went as far as to propose a moratorium on gene drive research and future use of the technology. While ultimately the member states did not support the idea of a moratorium, they included gene drive in the scope of work of the AHTEG.

**In preparation for the next meeting in December 2018, the online forum and the AHTEG will be** [**renewed**](https://bch.cbd.int/synbio)**. Based on the tenor of the conversation at COP13, it is likely that gene drive will feature as a very important issue. The groups opposed to gene drive have been very active in the previous online forum and in the AHTEG. Ensuring that both a balance of views is represented and high quality evidence is submitted through the forum and expert group discussions will be important to shape the report that will be presented in 2018 at the 14th meeting of the CBD.**

**1- The Online Forum**

* What is the online forum?

The online forum is meant to enable experts to discuss key issues under consideration by the Convention. The discussion then feed the work of the AHTEG which ultimately is presented in a report to the CBD and its member states. The evidence (studies, data, case studies...) submitted during the online forum is also compiled by the CBD secretariat and used to shape the report of the expert group.

* What are the topics to be discussed?

The online forum will likely run for a month, with different questions being addressed in succession. The decision taken in December 2016 outlines 4 main topics to be examined. While there is leeway for the organisers to ask broader questions, or let participants raise other topics, it can be expected that at minimum those questions will be addressed:

1. Review recent technological developments within the field of synthetic biology
2. Identify any living organisms already developed or currently under research and development through techniques of synthetic biology which do not fall under the definition of living modified organisms under the Cartagena Protocol
3. Analyse evidence of benefits and adverse effects of synthetic biology products/organisms and gather information on risk management measures, safe use and best practices for safe handling
4. Evaluate the availability of tools to detect and monitor the organisms/products of synthetic biology

Examples of past discussions can be read here: <https://bch.cbd.int/synbio/open-ended/discussion_2014-2016.shtml>

* Who can participate?

Anyone who is nominated by a Party (a country) or an organisation. The criterais for choosing who participates are not clear but presumably relevant experience and knowledge in the subject area are the main pre-requisite.

* How do we register?

Participation in the online forum is open to all interested parties, but they must be nominated by a relevant CBD national focal point or a head of organization. Nominations are accepted on a rolling basis.

Nominations should be submitted to synbio@cbd.int, indicating names, title and email addresses of the nominees. Nominees will then be contacted by the forum organizers to fill in an online form in order to finalize the registration process.

A full list of current participants is available here: <https://bch.cbd.int/synbio/participants/>

* When will it take place?

The dates for the online forum are not yet decided but it is expected to take place in the summer or second half of 2017.

**2- The AHTEG on Syn Bio**

* What is the AHTEG?

The Ad hoc Technical Expert Group is a forum where experts nominated by countries can discuss the issue of synthetic biology and prepare recommendations for the member states to consider at their next meeting. The questions for discussion are set by the member states. The current AHTEG's mandate was initially created in 2014 ([decision XII/24](https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-12/cop-12-dec-24-en.pdf)) and it was renewed in 2016. The questions before the group are the four outlined above under the description of the Online Forum. With gene drive explicitly mentioned in the decision take in 2016, it is likely that the group will discuss this topic.

* Who can participate?

Members of the AHTEG are selected by the CBD secretariat from among experts nominated to the open-ended online forum by the parties to the CBD, based on expertise and participation, as well as regional and gender balance. An expert who was not nominated for the online forum cannot be nominated to the AHTEG. So it is important to ensure a wide number of candidates are registered to the online forum to enhance the chances of an expert nomination to the AHTEG.

* How do we register?

It is not possible to register individuals, the nominations must come from countries that are party to the CBD. This will require early outreach to the representatives of the government to make them aware of possible candidates for nomination.

* When will it take place?

The dates are not yet known, but it usually works online and if budget is available, an in-person meeting would take place in 2018, prior to the CBD 14th meeting.

**Annex 1: AHTEG Members**

* Ms. Luciana Ambrozevicius, Brazil
* Ms. Anita Anthonysamy, Malaysia
* Mr. Martin Batič, Slovenia
* Mr. Taye Birhanu, Ethiopia
* Mr. José Leonardo Bocanegra Silva, Colombia
* Ms. Sorka Jannet Copa Romero, Bolivia
* Ms. Margret Engelhard, Germany
* Mr. Helmut Gaugitsch, Austria
* Ms. Boet Glandorf, Netherlands
* Ms. Romana Iftikhar, Pakistan
* Ms. Makueti Josephine Therese, Cameroon
* Mr. Benson Kinyagia, Kenya
* Mr. Ryo Kohsaka, Japan
* Mr. Peter Kwapong, Ghana
* Mr. Casper Linnestad, Norway
* Mr. Yongbo Liu, China
* Mr. Mart Loog, Estonia
* Mr. Jim Louter, Canada
* Ms. María Andrea Orjuela Restrepo, Mexico
* Mr. Michael Paton, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
* Mr. Elpidio Peria, Philippines
* Mr. Jean Roger Rakotoarijaona, Madagascar
* Mr. Lazaro Regalado, Cuba
* Ms. Zuzana Sekeyová, Slovakia
* Mr. Filemon Nghitilanganye Shindume, Namibia
* Ms. Katsiaryna Sidarenka, Belarus
* Ms. Maria de Lourdes Torres, Ecuador
* Mr. Nikolay Tzvetkov, Bulgaria
* Mr. Syed Shams Yazdani, India
* Ms. Genya Dana, United States of America
* Mr. Frederic Bass, Canadian Friends Service Committee
* Mr. Paul Freemont, Royal Society
* Mr. Robert Friedman, J. Craig Venter Institute
* Mr. Edward Hammond, Third World Network
* Ms. Felicity Keiper, EuropaBio
* Mr. Todd Kuiken, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
* Ms. Lúcia de Souza, Public Research & Regulation Initiative
* Ms. Ricarda Steinbrecher, Federation of German Scientists
* Mr. Christoph Then, Testbiotech
* Mr. Jim Thomas, ETC Group