

Marydelene Vasquez

UNEP-GEF Regional Adviser on BCH for the Caribbean Region

### **Building the Capacities of Caribbean Countries for Effective Participation in the BCH**

Becoming a Party to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety is often the culmination of an involved and sometimes extended process for a country. Although it is a major milestone and a noteworthy accomplishment, it is also the start of a new set of challenges for Parties as they seek to fulfill their international commitments under this Multilateral Environment Agreement.

Information-sharing is a key commitment of Parties under the Protocol. In particular, Article 20 establishes the Biosafety Clearing- House (BCH) as the mechanism for countries to share information relevant to the implementation of the Protocol. Under this Article, Parties are obliged to use the BCH to share biosafety-related information on national contacts, laws, international agreements, risk assessments and decisions regarding the transboundary movements of LMOs. It is therefore essential that all Parties become adept at using the BCH to enter their information and access information entered by other countries.

To this end, at their first meeting, in February 2004, the Conference of the Parties serving as the meeting of the Parties to the Protocol (COP-MOP) approved the transition of the pilot phase of the BCH to the fully operational phase. To assist countries in fulfilling their information-sharing and public education obligations under the Protocol, the “Project for Building Capacity for Effective Participation in the Biosafety Clearing House of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety” was initiated. To date, the BCH Project has signed MOUs with 110 countries to build national capacity in using the BCH.

The truth is that the use of the BCH by Parties, especially by least developed States and small island developing States, has not taken off as quickly as was initially expected. The Caribbean subregion provides an interesting case study of the challenges and obstacles that Parties have faced, and are slowly overcoming, in fulfilling their information sharing obligations over the past five years.

When the Protocol entered into force, on 11 September 2003, four Caribbean nations were among the initial Parties. Today, five years later, thirteen Caribbean nations are Parties and two more have already expressed their intention to become Parties in writing and have already signed the Protocol.

Use of the BCH in the Caribbean region started slowly. Stephen Vitoria, a Regional Advisor in Information Technology for the BCH Project, who has participated in workshops in seven Caribbean countries over the past 1.5 years, attributes this slow start to the fact that the countries in this region have been struggling to define their National Biosafety Frameworks. With the assistance of the UNEP-GEF global project on the “Development of National Biosafety Frameworks (NBFs)”, these have now been defined for many of the Caribbean countries. However, Stephen believes that many of them are still some years away from actually implementing them. He says that until the NBFs are implemented, and the national laws, structures and networks are in place for implementation, there simply won't be very much national information to enter (especially with regards to laws and decisions).

The good news is that, through the efforts of the BCH Project, there has been a noticeable increase in usage over the past 2 years. With project assistance, eleven Caribbean countries are receiving assistance to host national workshops on the use of the BCH and to purchase computer equipment and software to enable them to access the BCH. Additionally, two regional workshops have been held for the Caribbean subregion to reinforce the training received at the national level and also to foster networks and share experiences between nations.

Multiple national level workshops have been held in nine of these countries to date and two more are in the planning. These workshops aim to teach national government personnel, as well as non-government stakeholders, how to enter the national information required under the Protocol and how to find information entered by other Parties.

Dr. Michael De Shield, CPB and BCH Focal Point for Belize surmises that it is just as well that the Caribbean has gotten off to a slow start, since many of the mechanics of Protocol implementation – the national biosafety frameworks, handling, transport, packaging and

identification, liability and redress – are still being worked out in the international arena. Neither being at the forefront of biotechnology nor initiators of trade in GMOs, the Caribbean Parties, he says, have been looking to the more developed countries which have established NBFs to see what issues were arising that were affecting the operationalization of the NBFs. With the collective experience that the world has gained on these issues, he believes that this is now the opportune time for Caribbean Parties to start progressing more rapidly towards the implementation of their NBFs.

Despite the progress being made by Caribbean countries, many challenges remain if the region is to utilize the BCH fully. Sean Townsend, the BCH Focal Point for Jamaica, says that currently the primary obstacle to entering data is that his country is still in the process of preparing its Biosafety Policy, which would establish the national institutional framework of responsibilities. Until that is done, the full responsibility of data entry may lie solely with the BCH Focal Point. This may prove difficult if the volume of information to be registered is high or if the BCH Focal Point is not very familiar with the subject matter. Nevertheless, Sean says that their first national BCH workshop has had very positive results. First, it has raised the level of awareness on biosafety and the BCH among the key implementing agencies. Second, the participants who were trained have already taken on national training responsibilities within Jamaica. They will now be key to the nation's training and public awareness strategy. Furthermore, additional training courses are already being planned for additional stakeholder groups.

In sum, the key factors affecting the progress of Caribbean Parties in fulfilling their information sharing obligations using the BCH are (i) the need to implement their NBFs, (ii) the need to raise awareness; and (iii) train stakeholders and key personnel in the use of the BCH. Eleven Caribbean countries have already prepared and submitted draft NBFs. For many of these countries, official adoption of these NBFs by Governments will take several more months and full implementation may take years. Meanwhile, these countries are consolidating their national capacity in using the BCH, building public awareness on biosafety and registering their first national records in the BCH. Based on the foundation built over the past five years, the Caribbean region is now progressing steadily in its implementation of the Protocol.

