



Party-watch: Move over JUSCANZ? - Welcome CANJAB!

By Jim Thomas

Like any species, the community of negotiating parties at the CBD has its own curious population dynamics and group behaviours. Most parties organize themselves into regional families (the Africa group, the European group, GRULAC), but a notable non-geographic exception has been JUSCANZ - organized instead according to common corporate interests privilege and colonial power.

JUSCANZ may still have its own room upstairs, however, those tracking the Synthetic Biology and Biosafety topics have observed a distinct regrouping of this power block into a new formation - what might better be called CANJAB - Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Argentina, and Brazil.

Under the agenda item on Synthetic Biology, CANJAB group behavior was on full display. The six nations argue to reduce negotiating time, they re-tread long extinct arguments about definitions and roll out expired ploys around 'new and emerging issues'. Even as CANJAB bers handwring over not wasting precious secretariat, they feel entitled to take up over half the negotiating air time for their own antics.

CANJAB may represent merely 6 out of 196 countries, representing around 6% of the global human population - but this group sure does account for a lot of the world's industrial sheep, cattle, and soybean acres.

Those who recall the fight a quarter century ago to establish The Cartagena Biosafety Protocol may remember CANJAB's forbear: The 'Miami Group' - another 'obstructive six' of agribusiness-dominated countries who attempted to prevent the adoption of a precautionary protocol on LMO's. Like yesterday's unsuccessful Miami group, today's CANJAB group is firmly in the grip of corporate agribusiness and biotech interests. At least one of the CANJAB six, (Canada) even proudly boasts a member of CropLife (the pesticide and agribusiness lobby group) on its SBSTTA-26 delegation.

Will the CANJAB succeed in derailing majority support for precautionary horizon scanning, assessment and monitoring of Synthetic Biology? Watch this space...

Synbio discussions held to ransom

By Dr Eva Sirinathsinghji, Third World Network

Discussions on synthetic biology came to a halt on Thursday night after a handful of countries, driven by strong synbio business interests, were intent on blocking the process and reducing it to a technology transfer agenda and industry benefits sales exercise. As a result, discussions have stalled and much of the text remains bracketed and unresolved.

The non-paper was intended to deliver a package deal for (A) a process for capacity- building and development, access to and transfer of technology and knowledge-sharing around the topic of synthetic biology, and (B) a refined multidisciplinary methodology for regular and broad multidisciplinary horizon scanning, monitoring and assessment.

Most concerning, the discussions focussed on delinking technology transfer from the concomitant requirement for technology assessment and monitoring to ensure that technologies are environmentally appropriate, safe and effective. For appropriate technology transfer to take place, it should be rooted in articles 14, 16, 17 and 19 of the Convention.

Otherwise, synbio interests may have carte blanche to dump technologies on countries that risk being reduced to recipients of technologies with biosafety, socio-economic, ethical, or cultural risks.

Contact groups were stalled from the offset, with a handful of countries refusing to move forward with discussions on horizon scanning, monitoring, and assessment, and not wanting to extend the mandate further on the basis that they did not agree with the process. Parties unhappy with the outcomes of the mAHTEG report are strongly opposed to the inclusion of multidisciplinary expertise that gave assessments that may not suit their interests.

Assessments of technologies such as engineered gene drives, self-spreading vaccines, and the integration of AI with synthetic biology produced strong policy proposals by the mAHTEG, rooted in precaution, ethics, and efficacy. No wonder some do not want these to progress.

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