

**SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES
OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
“EXPERIENCE SHARING IN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND AWARENESS
OF BIOSAFETY ISSUES”
OCTOBER 1, 2013, MINSK, BELARUS**

Article 23 of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the Convention on Biological Diversity establishes the requirements to the Parties of the Protocol in promotion and facilitation of public awareness and education of biosafety issues, and also calls Parties to cooperate with other States and international bodies on those issues. In accordance with that recommendation, Belarus initiated holding the International conference “Experience Sharing in Public Education and Awareness of Biosafety Issues” in Minsk – the first conference on those problems in Central and East Europe. This event was dedicated to the 10th Anniversary of the Cartagena Protocol, and it had been supported by the Fund of the Central European Initiatives (CEI). The Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Belarus Mr. Kachanovsky, the Director of the Institute of Genetics and Cytology of the National Academy of Sciences, Prof. Kilchevsky and representative of the Executive Secretariat of the Aarhus Convention (Geneva, Switzerland) greeted the conference participants and emphasised the importance of that event for getting progress in involving public in decision-making on biosafety issues.

Presentations made by participants were focused on different ways of involving public in decision-making process on biosafety issues. The achievement of that aim is not an easy process in each country. Participants stressed the necessity to improve national and international biosafety legislation to get progress on this way.

All participants of the conference recognized the importance of the public participation in decision-making with regard to LMO/GMO transfer, handling and processing in each country of the world – Party or non-Party of the Cartagena Protocol and provision of citizens with materials concerning national and international biosafety legislation and explanation of appropriate articles of laws and Government resolutions. The experience of each country in developing biosafety legislation and involving public in decision-making process has been presented: well-developed mechanisms for collecting information concerning GMOs and obvious and intuitive databases on GMOs in Slovenia and Hungary, well-developed mechanisms of public involvement in the decision-making process in Hungary and Moldova's active position in the development and adoption of biosafety legislation and public education.

The conference resulted in agreed outcomes in regard to dissemination of the conference materials and the comments on biosafety legislation among citizens of conference participant countries and all other countries interested in those publications through libraries, newspapers and websites (Biosafety Clearing House

of the Executive Secretary of the Convention of Biological Diversity; Clearing House of Aarhus Convention, national biosafety websites, etc.).

It was noted that the development of the unified approach in the CEI countries on issues concerning public access to information, participation in the decision-making to ensure the safety of genetic engineering, and access to justice on issues relating to GMOs on the European and Global levels are needed. It was also emphasized that the practical application of the principles of the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the Aarhus Convention through the regular exchange of information on biosafety issued among the CEI countries (international meetings, the implementation of joint bilateral and multilateral projects, development of inter-regional information network, etc.) will be highly productive.

The international conference was a great opportunity for representatives of Belarus State bodies, Non-governmental organizations and scientists to get information directly from the government officers and scientists of CEI countries interested in proper ensuring and timely solution of biosafety issues and public involvement in their countries and to share Belarusian experience in that area.

The experience of the Republic of Belarus in ensuring citizens' awareness of the safety of genetic engineering activities, risk assessment and public participation in the decision-making process has been presented. Belarus participated actively in biosafety capacity-building process by implementing UNEP-GEF support projects resulted in development of the National Biosafety System by 2006. The Law of Safety of Genetic Engineering Activity and a number of appropriate Government Resolutions concerning the different branches of ensuring GMOs' safety came into force that year.

The Second National Biosafety Report, published in 2011 at BCH internet portal, presented legal documents which demonstrated that biosafety issues are of primary importance and governed by the appropriate Legislation in Belarus.

The Legislative Framework of the safety of genetic engineering activities, safety measures stipulated in it, the relevant articles of the laws establishing rights of public participation in decision-making process, the State bodies that implement the safety policies of genetic engineering and risk assessment process, establishing responsibility levels for violation of Legislation in the field of safety of genetic engineering activities have been highlighted in the presentations of speakers from Belarus

(<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/minchenko.pdf>,
<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/dromashko.pdf>
<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/mozgova.pdf>,
<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/zakharova.pdf>).

They noted that particular attention is paid to detection and identification of GMOs in food and feed entering the market in Belarus: there are 18 appropriate laboratories located in each chief regional town and in Minsk city. The labeling of all products containing GMOs was an obligatory requirement in our country (<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/dromashko.pdf>) before acceding Belarus to the Customs Union in 2012. From the 1st of July 2013 it is required to get quantitative parameter of GMO in food, feed and food raw

material – the label must be put only on the products containing more than 0,9% of GMO ingredients.

There are several laboratories in Belarus where transgenic organisms carrying valuable economic traits are being developed and the National Coordination Biosafety Center (NCBC) works actively in the field of public education and awareness of the issues of genetic engineering activity (conditions for contained systems, laboratories of GMO-detection, procedure of risk assessment and public participation in it, main laws stipulating this area, explanation of GMO-labeling conditions, the public awareness in regard to resources of access to actual information, etc.)

(<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/dromashko.pdf>
<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/mozgova.pdf>).

The requirements to the procedure of getting permission for release of transgenic organisms into the environment are under strong legal control to prevent adverse effects of GMO on biodiversity and human health.

The approaches to public education on biosafety issues have been presented by Belarussian speakers. The most common ones among them were press-conferences and interviews given by the NCBC personnel and relevant representatives of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection to national TV centres, local newspapers and Internet sites. Another way to provide the public with actual information in the biosafety field and opportunity to get the competent response of the relevant specialists is maintenance of biosafety website by NCBC and publication biosafety information at the websites of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection, the Aarhus Center of the Republic of Belarus, dissemination of the scientific and legal information in regard to GMOs among the active part of the citizens – school teachers, pupils and students: through the methodological journals for teachers, by delivering special biosafety theoretical courses and practical trainings developed in the NCBC, by including biosafety issues into the education process in the relevant state institutions, holding the seminars for students and workshops for the specialists dealing with GMOs by the NCBC staff

(<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/minchenko.pdf>,
<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/mozgova.pdf>).

In spite of the undoubted success, the gaps in the field of biosafety education in Belarus have been revealed. There are still low level in the following areas of activity: education of the citizens who may be interested in the decision-making on specific biosafety issues (for example, in the case of GMOs release for field trials); awareness of the rights for access to scientific information of GMOs and to sources of actual information placed at websites; awareness of the periphery population in comparison with the population of Minsk - the capital of the country. In particular, the Aarhus Center website requests` analysis has shown that 80% of all requests received were sent from Minsk, with low activity of the periphery being observed. It also has been shown also that the average age of people who sent questions - 38 years

(<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/zakharova.pdf>).

The Chair-man of Belarusian Public Association “Ecological Initiation” has stressed that insufficient coverage of the event targeted directly on certain segments of the population or community can lead to termination of the project and more serious efforts should be applied (for example, face to face meetings with the local public, additional expensive tests and full-scale laboratory examinations, etc.) to prove the safety of the genetic engineering activity

(<http://biosafety.org.by/sites/default/files/downloads/Conferences/cei-2013/soloviev.pdf>).

Therefore the competent explanation of scientific and economic value of the genetic engineering activity to the citizens whom this activity may directly affect are one of the most effective means of the information provision.

Belarus and Moldova agreed to initiate the joint project of developing the Central-and-Eastern Europe (CEE) regional information and methodological network on involving public in biosafety decision-making process.

- **Materials of the Conference are placed at the biosafety website supported by the National Coordination Biosafety Centre**
<http://biosafety.org.by/cei-2013>