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**“New and Emerging Issues” at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity:
Exploring Responses to Scientific Uncertainties**

No specialized body within the UN system evaluates emerging technosciences. Responding to what they perceive as a gap, civil society movements, NGOs, and certain States are taking their concerns with some technosciences to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The CBD has produced “soft law” guidance on issues such as geoengineering, ocean fertilization, genetically engineered trees, and genetic use restriction technologies. In the context of a “New and Emerging Issues” (NEI) mechanism, the CBD has recently engaged with biofuels and synthetic biology. Through the CBD’s political body, the Conference of the Parties (COP), Parties have repeatedly invoked the need for precaution in relation to these two issues. CBD Parties do not, however, agree on the meaning or implications of precaution. One area of disagreement is what entails a “lack of full scientific certainty.”

Through interviews, analysis of texts, participant observation at CBD meetings from 2010 to 2014, and reflections on working for the CBD Secretariat as an intern in 2013 and consultant in 2014, I examine the treaty’s responses to scientific uncertainties related to NEI negotiations. I first explore how actors’ invocations of precaution aligned with their descriptions of relevant scientific uncertainties at the 2010 COP 10 biofuel negotiations (Stirling 2007; Wynne 1992). The discussions addressed a broad range of types of uncertainty, but the COP’s textual output reduced these to gaps in knowledge. I then trace some of the implications of restricting attention to a narrow range of uncertainties, as CBD bodies have struggled to agree on a response to biofuels-related indirect land use change or on proper application of the NEI criteria to synthetic biology. What kinds of uncertainties should be legible to the treaty? How should the treaty respond to the absence of evidence? These questions are broadly relevant for biodiversity governance, but are particularly salient for emerging technosciences. I consider alternatives for the CBD’s future engagement with NEI.