



International chemical initiatives

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Since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro a major international initiative for improved chemical and pesticide management has been established. This briefing outlines its role and context.

Chemical concerns

Chemicals have become an integral part of the social and economic fabric of society. But many chemicals have dangerous properties and much remains to be done to ensure the health, safety and environmental impact of their use is contained.

An umbrella initiative

A London meeting preparing for UNCED recommended setting up an inter-governmental body to address the problems which have arisen from widespread use of toxic chemicals. The problem is most urgent in developing countries, where the infrastructure and capacity to assess and manage chemicals is weak and scientific information to assess risks is lacking. Agenda 21 endorsed the recommendation, and called on the Executive Heads of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the UN Environment Programme and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), to convene an international meeting to establish a Forum. The Forum would bring together representatives of national governments responsible for chemicals management, non-governmental (industry, public interest, labour, science) and inter-governmental organisations.

Why a new body?

Many UN agencies deal with chemical matters, but a separate, independent entity could offer a direct mechanism to governments, rather than through the governing bodies of major international organizations for which chemical safety is but one of many issues. Secondly it offered better coordination within countries, as well as by international bodies.

Founding the Forum

The response was to establish an Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (called IFCS, or the Forum): "a non-institutional arrangement whereby representatives of governments meet together with intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations with the aim to integrate and consolidate national and international efforts to promote chemical safety." The result has been a dynamic programme of work developing higher standards of chemical management, better co-ordination between the chemical management aspects of UN and other key agencies, and a process for building the capacity to manage chemicals in an environmentally sound manner in developing countries.



UN hazard labels commonly used with pesticides

“Circumstances are similar in most neighbouring countries and there is transboundary movement of chemicals.

Working together can allow exchange of experience and divert duplication of work.”

National Profile Interim Report, Tanzania

The FORUM at work

The FORUM was formally created by an International Conference on Chemical Safety held in Stockholm in 1994. It meets every three years (1997, 2000). In between these meetings, an Intersessional Group (ISG) – officers of the Forum and not more than 26 government participants – meets to carry out its work. The ISG may make recommendations to the Forum, study special problems, and advise on the implementation of strategies and programmes. The Forum

also establishes Ad Hoc Working Groups to undertake specific tasks.

Representation

An important principle established in the IFCS meetings is the commitment to equal access to non-governmental organisations (industry, public interest, labour and science) who are free to express their views in meetings, and bring items on to the agenda, though may not vote. The goal is to seek consensus among these groups on strategies to address global chemical safety.

National contacts

National Focal Points are the backbone of the IFCS organization and the channel for information. Focal points provide the Forum with information and progress reports on national priorities.

Developing a programme

At its first meeting the Forum established priorities for action which elaborate the six programme areas identified in Agenda 21. These are:

- A Expanding and accelerating international assessment of chemical risks
- B Harmonization of classification and labelling of chemicals
- C Information exchange on toxic chemicals and chemical risks
- D Establishment of risk reduction programmes
- E Strengthening of national capabilities and capacities for management of chemicals
- F Prevention of illegal international traffic in toxic and dangerous products

This briefing deals with programme areas most relevant for pesticide management.

Better international co-ordination

Co-ordination on chemical management in the UN system has been improved through establishing a mechanism for co-ordination of the work in dealing with

these matters. Known as the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC), participating organisations are UNEP, ILO, FAO, WHO, UNIDO, UNITAR and OECD. The IOMC Secretariat is located in WHO. An important output is the biannual publication of a calendar and details of meetings and events of participating organisations in the area of chemical safety related to the programmes of the Forum.

Setting national priorities

Early in the process, countries agreed to develop a National Profile which would assess the available infrastructure for management of chemicals. A UNITAR Guidance Document helps governments prepare this, emphasising two important components. Firstly the need to work in a participatory manner, consulting a wide range of stakeholders: government, academic and research, industry and public interest groups. And secondly the key information to include: geographic and infrastructural constraints; production, import, export and use of chemicals; prioritisation of problems; legal and non-regulatory measures for managing chemicals; the main Ministries, agencies and institutions which manage chemicals; and relevant activities of industry, public interest groups and the research sector.

Many National Profiles have been completed and provide a valuable source of information on chemical management strategies and capacity-building efforts. They enable countries to identify priorities between institutional constraints, information gaps, and need to raise awareness. A real benefit is that they establish a country-, rather than donor-, driven approach. The European Commission (DGXI and DGVIII) has, through collaboration with UNITAR, assisted a number of countries in preparing their National Profile.

Informal capacity-building network

The UNITAR/IOMC Pilot Programme to Assist Countries in Implementing National Action Programmes for Integrated Chemicals Management has established a network to encourage information sharing, twinning, and partnerships from governments, specialist agencies, research, industry, NGOs and others to help governments implement their identified needs. Programmes are advanced in Argentina, Ghana, Indonesia and Slovenia.

Persistent organic pollutants (POPs)

Negotiations for a legally binding instrument to deal with POPs have begun. These chemicals are highly persistent in the environment. Of the 12 identified POPs, nine are pesticides: DDT, aldrin, dieldrin, endrin, hexachlorobenzene, heptachlor, chlordane, mirex and toxaphene. Preparation for the negotiations

A National Action Programme in Ghana

Ghana is participating in the UNITAR / IOMC Pilot Capacity Building Programme. The Environmental Protection Agency is the National Coordinator, and the project has support of all relevant Ministries, NGOs, industry and specialised agencies. A meeting in May 1997 was attended by 45 participants from governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, FAO, UNIDO and UNITAR. In August 1997 a National Priority Setting Workshop, again with a wide range of participants, identified priority areas for Technical Task Forces (TTF):

A TTF on education and awareness-raising to develop a strategy for chemicals and pesticides with train-the-trainer components;

A TTF on technical and legal infrastructure to review legal and laboratory infrastructure for sound management of chemicals.

A TTF on data collection and management to establish a chemicals management information system and improve monitoring of chemicals movement and use .

A representative National Coordinating Team is being established



Chemical management in Ghana means safer pesticide distribution

"There is much evidence that the National Profile, when completed, will be endorsed by all parties as a national reference document and with commitment to using the document as a basis for moving towards integrated national policies for the sound management of chemicals."
National Profile Interim Report.

was greatly assisted by the IFCS ad hoc Working Group on POPs. Support may continue, particularly in collecting information on national and regional priorities and issues which should be addressed during the POPs Convention negotiations.

FAO – good practice programmes

As the IFCS partner with major responsibility for pesticides, FAO reports on its capacity building efforts in pesticides management to the FORUM. FAO has maintained an active programme on pesticides since 1959, which now follows guidelines established by the 1985 *International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides*. The aim is to promote and assist in developing acceptable pesticide management practices within the framework of integrated Pest Management (IPM) principles.

FAO runs a substantial technical assistance programme. Projects cover training to improve management; strengthening or establishing pesticide registration and control schemes; and laboratory and related infrastructure. The assistance enables developing countries to evaluate health and environmental hazards and risks, and increase ability to detect, monitor and control illegal import or traffic of banned, restricted or unregistered pesticides.

Disposal of Obsolete Pesticides
The Forum and the POPs negotiations have together increased

awareness of the intractable problem of stocks of obsolete pesticides in developing countries, and countries in Eastern Europe. The total is estimated to be in excess of 200,000 tonnes. Many of these are highly persistent pesticides which remain in unsafe containers and locations (see PMN 3).

Reduction in pesticide use

The OECD hosts for its Member States the Pesticide Forum, focusing on pesticide regulation and risk reduction. In developing countries, the FAO IPM programme in rice in South and South East Asia, and in other regions, has achieved a significant reduction in pesticide use by farmers, without reduction in yield. The IPM approaches demonstrate the importance of providing alternatives to hazardous chemicals, and not only in managing risks.

Progress through the FORUM

The matters progressed and coordinated through the Forum are often led by one of its partner agencies. Some of the developments most relevant for pesticides are:

Harmonisation of classification and labelling

This activity, led by the OECD, aims to achieve a globally harmonized hazard classification and comparable labelling system for chemicals, including material safety data sheets (MSDS) and easily understandable symbols, by 2000. As different global systems exist, harmonisation presents stubborn problems. Developing country issues, such as packaging appropriate for the end user and labels in local languages, need to be prioritised.

"The National Profile will lead to informing and educating the public ... and setting up an emergency response system for poisoning cases."

National Profile Interim Report, Benin

Key points

- ❖ The IFCS provides a structure for good co-ordination on chemical and pesticide management matters and following its agenda will avoid duplication
- ❖ National profiles assessing infrastructure for management of chemicals will promote country-driven, rather than donor-driven approaches
- ❖ An internationally coordinated agenda can promote sustainable alternatives, particularly for pesticides, and not just better management of chemicals

Poison Control Facilities

A project of the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS) is supporting the development of National Poison Control Facilities and harmonisation of data collection. In developing countries pesticides are generally the main call on these facilities, but many developing countries, especially in Africa, have no centre.

Pollution Release Transfer Registers (PRTRs)

PRTRs monitor releases of priority chemicals to air, water and land and ensure that information is available as part of a community right-to-know. These relate to production plants, but there have been attempts to relate it to pesticide use. The IOMC has established a coordinating group on PRTRs to support their development.

Bringing in new issues: Endocrine disruptors

IFCS participants expressed concern over scientific evidence that certain pesticides may interfere with the endocrine system and cause adverse health effects. Following an IFCS request, the IPCS and OECD are addressing this through the development of an international science assessment report, a global inventory of on-going research, and test guidelines.

A role for donors

Donors have an important role in keeping abreast of developments in the Forum and supporting specific activities. The IFCS mechanism can be used to better identify the technical needs of countries and facilitate the development of partnerships to match these needs.

Contacts

Details of programmes can be obtained from the relevant contacts. These contacts represent the main UN agencies in the IFCS and the IOMC.

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