

New call for ban on highly toxic pesticides

Pesticide poisonings remain commonplace in developing countries despite international initiatives addressing this problem. The agriculture committee of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation has now come out strongly in support of a progressive ban on the most hazardous pesticides. Barbara Dinham reports.

Poisoning and ill-health are an everyday occurrence among agricultural workers and small scale farmers who regularly use pesticides. Official numbers are unreliable or absent. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimate of three million poisonings a year is now nearly 20 years old. Use of hazardous pesticides has increased in developing countries since then, and targeted studies suggest the numbers are much higher than the WHO figures¹. Interviews with farmers in any area where pesticides are often used show resignation that ill-health – headaches, nausea, skin and eye problems, for example – are the price of a livelihood.

This widespread exposure to pesticides results in long and short-term health impacts. Additionally, easy access to extremely toxic pesticides in rural homes has made pesticides the most common means of attempting suicide in many countries². The problem of self-poisoning with pesticides now accounts for 50%-75% of all deaths among young women in the 10-19 year age groups in south India³.

International and national initiatives have attempted to address these problems. The International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides sets regulatory standards and guidelines. This Code has been agreed by governments through the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and signed up to by the agrochemical industry.

Recognising the scale and significance of poisonings, governments have called for further action on highly toxic pesticides in a number of other international fora, including the Strategic Approach to International Chemical Management. In November 2006, the decision-making Council of FAO⁴ recog-

nised the need to reduce pesticide risks, and set as a priority a 'progressive ban on highly toxic pesticides'. This was followed up with detailed recommendations at the FAO agriculture committee meeting in March 2007⁵.

Removing the most hazardous pesticides from the market is the only option to stem the tide of ill health in poor countries. The farming conditions are unsafe, people lack the means to take essential precautions even if they were available, and countries cannot afford inspectors to enforce regulations. A recent study in part of the Brazilian Amazon found high usage of highly toxic pesticides among farmers growing fresh vegetables for regional urban markets. The farmers believe pesticides are necessary. The investigators found that few farmers read product labels; they find the fonts too small, the instructions too long, and the language overly technical. Farmers understood few of the pictograms on labels, which aim to inform the illiterate – in fact some of these were dangerously misinterpreted⁶. This is alarming considering that, for example, 42% of farmers use methylparathion which is classified extremely hazardous by the WHO.

The Code of Conduct already supports similar actions, and has established that 'Prohibition of the importation, sale and purchase of highly toxic and hazardous products, such as those included in WHO classes Ia and Ib may be desirable'⁷. These classes encompass extremely and highly hazardous pesticides. However the WHO classification of acute toxicity does not provide a good basis for action. Two highly problematic pesticides, endosulfan and paraquat, both responsible for widespread cases of ill health and fatalities^{8,9}, are only classified 'moderately hazardous' by

the WHO. Many other pesticides causing ill-health, for example the problematic organophosphates, are classed by the WHO to be of only moderate or low acute toxicity. A new definition to guide decision makers on when to take action is essential.

The Rotterdam Convention on Prior Informed Consent recognised this problem and developed a category of 'severely hazardous pesticide formulations' for information exchange. However, so far few governments have identified products falling into this category. To nominate a pesticide they would need to document specific incidents of poisoning and carry out field visits to interview those affected. Limited resources make identification of incidents and back up to record details a challenge. But it is clear that poisonings are still continuing on a significant scale. This new FAO call to identify 'highly toxic pesticides' rather than specific products and document particular cases, would help efforts to phase out the most toxic pesticides. More importantly, it would give impetus to the importance of phasing in safer and more sustainable pest management strategies.

International efforts now need to be directed to identifying the pesticides causing harm in developing countries and removing them from sale as quickly as possible. The first step would be defining broad criteria to guide action on progressive bans. The second step is helping governments adopt pesticide reduction strategies with training in integrated pest management, organic agriculture or agro-ecological approaches. FAO is ideally placed to play a greater role in these efforts, but will need increased funds to support the work.

References

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Farmer meeting near Moshi, Tanzania, expressing concerns about health and financial problems arising from pesticide dependence

Photo: Barbara Dinham