

Study of the possible effects on human health and the environment in Africa on the trade of products containing lead, cadmium and mercury.

Draft report of workshop

9 February 2009, 9am to 1 pm.

The meeting, attended by approximately eighty participants, was opened at 9.15 by UNEP. In opening, the financial contributions of the government of Sweden and of the Nordic Council of Ministers were recognized.

In setting out the background for the study, it was highlighted that the interim reports on lead and cadmium had identified a number of data gaps, including a lack of information on the trade of products containing these substances. The present study was designed to address some of these data gaps.

The study, which had been developed by the African Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption and Production, was then presented by their representative. Key features highlighted were the range of products moving in trade, trading partners and the uncertainties about quantities which were being traded. The results of sampling tests were presented. In discussion following the presentation, the low levels of heavy metals detected in the samples was queried, and it was suggested that there may have been difficulties with sampling. For instance, soil samples may not have detected contaminants if they had leached out of the topsoil.

It was suggested that the study could be improved by a wider range of sampling and more extensive investigation. It was noted that the study should be seen as a starting point, presenting information available at this time. The secretariat noted also that comments on the study were welcomed, and requested comments be submitted by 30 April 2009. To facilitate this process, the study and request for comments would be made available on the lead and cadmium website (www.chem.unep.ch/Pb_and_Cd).

An analysis of the questionnaires which had been submitted by 19 governments and 3 nongovernmental organization prior to the workshop was then presented by the secretariat. Key points included the small number of countries which had a system to register the intended use of products containing cadmium, lead and mercury, the lack of adequate waste management or recycling strategies, and the lack of a mechanism to collect trade statistics on the final destination or use of products. The complexity of the trade issue was highlighted by the range of trade partners identified, and the extensive products of concern, with trade being both local and between regions. Many responding countries were aware of cases where lead, cadmium or mercury had possibly had effects on the environment or human health. A wide range of strategies, at the national, regional and global levels had been identified through the questionnaires.

A report highlighting the presence of toxic substances in toys and office supplies in Peru was presented. The report highlighted the national controls in place, and examples of sampled toys which exceeded the national maximum permitted levels. In many of the toys, the levels were significantly higher than permitted concentrations. All of the sampled toys identified with high levels of toxic substances were imported from one country, while high levels of toxic substances were not identified in toys manufactured in other countries at this time. The report concluded that action to protect health and environment should be taken before severe poisonings were seen.

During the discussion, it was further noted that these tests were not done at the customs entry point, but were based on samples taken from around the country. The study had focused on contaminant level, with further tests on toxicological effects planned. It was noted that toys containing levels of heavy metals which were a concern made up less than 1% of the total toys on the market. Another point raised was that these results were of concern to other developing countries which may have similar problems, and the need for further work was highlighted.

A report from Toxics Link, an Indian non-governmental organization, was then presented. The issues of heavy metals in India were highlighted, and the results of a recent study on heavy metals in toys was presented. While the focus of the study was on cheaper toys, other, more expensive toys were also tested. Around 77% of the samples had very high lead levels. Tests on lead in paint also found a large number of samples with high lead levels, even though lead-free paints were available from these manufacturers. Impacts from electronics were found throughout the lifecycle, as well as that of mercury. Due to the lack of labeling requirements, and the lack of encouragement for substitution of the more toxic substances, the communities were largely uninformed about the hazards, and the impacts were the greatest on the most vulnerable communities.

A final report on heavy metals toxicity in children's toys in Nigeria had similar results to those in Peru and India. The focus was heavy metal levels in non branded imported toys, with quite high levels found in soft PVC toys.

During the following discussion, it was noted that global recall of some toys had been required in the past few years due to high levels of lead.

Concerns were raised about the feasibility of developing countries undertaking analyses of heavy metal levels. It was noted that, while scientific rigour was necessary, such tests were not difficult and only required standard laboratory equipment.

The issue of substitution was raised and it was reiterated that for a number of uses, particularly in paints, substitutes are available at a very limited additional cost.

An extensive discussion on the establishment and use of standards followed. It was noted that there are a number of standards in use internationally, and these may not necessarily be consistent. It was noted that the application of a standard (whether national or international) was a difficult task, and implied a commitment to a testing regime to ensure adherence. The need to have some standard in place, however, was highlighted as a first step in controlling levels of toxic substances.

Further discussions were held about the difference between levels of toxic substances present in articles, and the levels of actual exposure to those using the articles. The need for further epidemiological studies to investigate potential effects was highlighted. A contrasting view presented was that, rather than undertaking further research, efforts should be directed towards preventing use of toxic substances, particularly where readily available substitutes could be used. The use of such alternatives should be strongly encouraged.

The need to translate scientific awareness of the issues into governmental policy was highlighted as a challenge, particularly in developing countries. It was noted that the increasing numbers of chemical related accidents were forcing government to consider this as a policy issue. International forums such as the UNEP Governing Council and the International Conference on

Chemicals Management (ICCM) were highlighted as key venues for the involvement of senior government officials in chemicals issues.

In summarizing, the main areas for further work highlighted in the discussion included the following:

Awareness raising.

Particularly focused on increasing community awareness of the hazards associated with common products

Capacity building

To assist in particular with the development of national controls and enforcement as well as the ability to undertake necessary analyses for further information gathering.

Further studies – trade, epidemiology, toxicity, environmental availability

The complexity of the trade issue would benefit from further studies. Additional information on the effects of toxic substances contained in products, particularly the degree to which they are available to the environment, would be useful

Explore international standards

Further clarification about current standards, including elaborating the similarities and differences, would assist countries in determining the suitability of such standards nationally. Later work could look at the possibility of establishing an international standard, however it was recognised that this would be very challenging.

Substitution

This was seen as a very sound preventive measure where alternatives are readily available, such as lead-free paint. It was recognized that such activities would benefit from industry cooperation, government regulation and greater public awareness.

The meeting closed at 12:50.