

## Steps to Solving the Global POPs Problem

Jim Willis, UNEP Chemicals, 11-13 chemin des Anémones, CH-1219 Châtelaine (GE),  
Switzerland

### ABSTRACT

Over the course of the past few years, a number of actions have been undertaken to address the global problem of persistent organic pollutants (POPs). In 1997, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was requested by governments to convene negotiations of a global legally binding instrument to reduce and/or eliminate releases of POPs into the environment. In addition, UNEP and others were called upon to undertake a number of immediate actions to rapidly respond to the global POPs problem and reduce exposures and risks in the near term. The combination of requested actions, and the urgency of the request, has resulted in rapid progress on the future POPs treaty as well as a number of interesting and innovative arrangements to address the POPs problem, particularly in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past 30 or so years, a number of countries have taken steps to address national risks from persistent organic pollutants. These have included imposing bans or severe restrictions on organochlorine pesticides, and regulating polychlorinated benzenes and in many cases taking them out of use and disposing of them. A relatively more recent development is acknowledgement of the risks of dioxins and furans, and taking steps to quantify releases and address the sources of environmental release.

As the extent of the transboundary nature of the POPs problem became better understood, governments began the steps of developing bilateral agreements as well as regional treaties to control the continued spread of pollution from POPs. These include such measures as the Oslo-Paris Convention (North-East Atlantic), the Barcelona Resolution (Mediterranean), the Canada/USA Great Lakes Agreement, the Helsinki Convention (Baltic) and the UNECE POPs Protocol of the Convention on Long Range Transboundary Air Pollution.

Eventually it was recognized that, although these many national actions and regional agreements were of great benefit, particularly as concerned local exposures, POPs represented a truly global problem that could not be addressed without a global approach. At the 18<sup>th</sup> session of UNEP's Governing Council in 1995, governments called for an assessment of the global POPs problem to be developed under the Inter-Organization Programme for Chemical Safety<sup>1</sup> (IOMC) and the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS). The Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) was requested to consider the analysis developed under the IOMC and make recommendations for action to UNEP for consideration by the Governing Council at its 19<sup>th</sup> session in 1997. On the basis of the recommendations made by IFCS, the decision was taken by

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<sup>1</sup> A programme to promote strengthened coordination among the major intergovernmental organisations involved in Chemical safety (UNEP, ILO, FAO, WHO, UNIDO, UNITAR, and OECD).

UNEP's Governing Council to convene intergovernmental negotiations of a legally binding instrument to reduce and/or eliminate the release of POPs into the environment. In addition, because of the urgency of the POPs problem and due to the likelihood of many uncontrolled local POPs releases and problems, UNEP's Governing Council also called for immediate action on the part of governments and others to address POPs.

As a result of this mandate, UNEP convened negotiations of a global legally binding instrument beginning in early 1998. Simultaneously, UNEP undertook and strengthened a programme of action involving governments, NGOs and other intergovernmental organizations, which has led to direct positive results.

## Results

Towards development of the POPs convention, UNEP has to date convened 4 meetings of an intergovernmental negotiating committee (INC), as follows:

- INC1: Montreal (29 June 29 - 3 July 1998)
- INC2: Nairobi (25 - 29 January 1999)
- INC3: Geneva (6-11 September 1999)
- INC4: Bonn (20-25 March 2000)

During this process a subsidiary body was established, named the Criteria Expert Group. The task of this group was to develop criteria and a process to identify and add further POPs to the treaty after it entered into force. This open-ended group concluded its work in 2 meetings held in Bangkok on 26-30 October 1998, and Vienna on 14-18 June 1999.

A fifth and final meeting of the INC has been scheduled for Johannesburg, South Africa for 4-9 December, 2000. This final session will agree to the complete text of the instrument, which would be adopted and signature begun at a Diplomatic Conference in Stockholm on 21-23 May 2001.

UNEP has initiated immediate actions in several areas. This has served to assist countries in taking actions to protect human health and the environment to identify and reduce and/or eliminate releases of POPs into the environment. This has resulted in a number of new partnerships and creative arrangements to best promote these reduction-related activities. Some examples include:

- Establishment of a joint FAO/UNEP expert group on termites to assist countries in developing and implementing strategies to reduce or eliminate the use of POPs insecticides for termite control.
- Establishment of an IOMC Coordinating Group on Unwanted Stocks of Pesticides and Other Chemicals integrating the work of FAO, WHO, OECD, UNEP and the Secretariat of the Basel Convention (SBC).
- Establishment of a joint UNEP/FAO/WHO programme to support enhanced collaboration of integrated pest management (IPM) and integrated vector management (IVM) programmes for POPs reductions.

- Establishment of a cooperative venture between the WHO Roll Back Malaria programme and UNEP's programme to help countries reduce reliance on DDT to protect public health from malaria while simultaneously protecting the environment from DDT risks.
- Promotion of cooperative bilateral programmes on POPs, e.g., the GTZ/UNEP/Thailand project on dioxins and furans.
- Joint projects between UNEP and SBC to develop inventories of polychlorinated biphenyls in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.

These projects and activities are additional to activities engaged in by UN organizations directly, and bilaterally between governments.

## DISCUSSION

At the political level, a great deal of progress has been made since 1997 to address the release of POPs into the environment. The negotiations have gained increasing momentum, with 120 governments actively participating, and strong measures proposed to reduce and/or eliminate releases of these chemicals into the environment.

In addition, the negotiations have proven to be a crucial factor in driving early reductions of release, and a number of country based activities. In a regular survey performed by UNEP, altogether 95 countries report some degree of active programme to address POPs. These country-based programmes are complemented by active programmes at the regional or global level by almost a dozen intergovernmental organizations.

Additionally, this strong political mandate has encouraged a number of multisectoral approaches to better address the problem. Partnerships in the public health and environment sectors, and agriculture and environment sectors have formed, and are facilitating concrete actions in countries. Furthermore, these activities have encouraged industry and public interest NGOs to cooperate positively in helping countries take needed actions.

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