

## OVERVIEW OF THE STOCKHOLM CONVENTION ON PERSISTENT ORGANIC POLLUTANTS (POPs)

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### 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 resulted in rapid progress, culminating with the adoption of the Stockholm Convention on POPs on 22 May, 2001. The presentation will provide an overview of the key provisions of the convention and offer thoughts for future activities.

### 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

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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).

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 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.

In December, 2000 the negotiations were concluded. On 22 May, in Stockholm, the convention was adopted by 127 governments and signed by 91 governments (two additional governments have since signed the treaty). The convention has as its goal the protection of health and the environment by reducing and/or eliminating the generation, use and/or release of 12 specified POPs (aldrin, chlordane, chlorinated dioxins and furans, DDT, dieldrin, endrin, heptachlor, hexachlorobenzene (HCB), mirex, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), and toxaphene). The convention will require actions to be taken to reduce or eliminate the production, use and/or release of intentionally and unintentionally produced POPs and to prevent the introduction to commerce of new POPs. Trade in intentionally produced POPs will be restricted. Stockpiles and wastes containing or contaminated by POPs must be stored, handled and disposed of in an environmentally sound manner. POPs in addition to the initial 12 substances may be added to the Convention in the future by application of scientific criteria and a specified process.

The development of the Convention has already resulted in actions being taken by the public, public interest groups, industry, governments and regional and intergovernmental organizations to reduce the generation, use and release of POPs. However, several challenges remain in getting the global community to fully implement the Stockholm Convention. Fifty countries must ratify the Convention for it to enter into force, and technical and financial assistance will be needed for developing countries and countries with economies in transition to enable them to meet the ratification requirements for the Convention. Continued financial and technical support from developed countries, intergovernmental organizations, and development agencies such as the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility will be needed in the coming years to sustain the required effort to reduce and/or eliminate the risks posed by these toxic and pervasive substances.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Not applicable.

## **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)

# INTERNAT'L TREATIES

- INC2: Nairobi (25 - 29 January 1999)
- INC3: Geneva (6-11 September 1999)
- INC4: Bonn (20-25 March 2000)
- INC5: Johannesburg (4-10 December 2001)
- Conference of Plenipotentiaries: Stockholm (22-23 May 2001)

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.

UNEP has also 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 of projects include:

- Promotion of cooperative bilateral programmes on POPs, e.g., the GTZ/UNEP/Thailand project on dioxins and furans.
- Providing a series of training workshops for countries on alternatives to POPs pesticides, on PCB identification, management and disposal, and on identifying and addressing sources of dioxin and furan releases.
- Joint projects between UNEP and SBC to develop inventories of polychlorinated biphenyls in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.
- Projects to promote development of dioxin and furan inventories in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.
- Projects to assist developing countries and countries with economies in transition to develop implementation plans for the Stockholm Convention.

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 Stockholm Convention puts in place strong measures to reduce and/or eliminate releases of these chemicals into the environment. This is now a major driving force in international environmental protection. The convention also integrates provisions to reduce or eliminate releases of POPs with a financial mechanism that will enable developing countries and countries with economies in transition to fully implement the requirements. In

# INTERNAT'L TREATIES

addition to directly addressing the POPs problem, this will also help countries build stronger chemicals management infrastructures and support their efforts towards sustainable development.

In addition, the negotiations have proven to be a crucial factor in promoting early reductions of releases, and a number of country based activities. In a regular survey performed by UNEP, altogether over 100 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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