

Executive Summary

The workshop brought together participants from the countries of the South East Asian Region (SEAR) and a number of international experts, to share experiences in managing hazardous wastes. The workshop was set out to help develop a regional action plan for the sound management of hazardous wastes. Specifically, the event allowed participants to obtain an overview of the potential environmental health problems that are linked to the way these wastes are managed currently.

Besides having the opportunity to learn from and exchange on national experiences — such as lessons learnt from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Maldives in post tsunami — the participants were also technically updated on recent international developments. WHO's global policy for sound health care wastes management (HCWM) and the activities of FAO's Programme on the Prevention and Disposal of Obsolete Pesticide Programme were presented and discussed. Participants were briefed on possibilities for capacity building such as the distance learning HCWM programme offered by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) in India. Enriched by these various inputs, the participants could identify priorities for action and develop draft elements to strengthen existing national and regional initiatives addressing the sound management of hazardous wastes in the SEAR.

From the start of the workshop, the emphasis was put on capacity building: Dr Y. N. Kandun, Director General, Ministry of Health, Government of Indonesia, encouraged FAO and WHO to continue supporting these joint activities in an effort to narrow the existing gap in national capacities to manage chemicals in a sound manner.

The participants benefited from over fifteen excellent country presentations. Focus was given on problems related to the existence of counterfeit and substandard chemicals and medical drugs in SEAR countries. Poor data, low enforcement of already outdated legislation, scarce quality control and lack of coordination amongst concerned authorities were presented as reasons for the low capacity to address challenges posed by chemicals in general. The porosity of national border controls is also a major contributor to this lack of order. The poor management systems were seen as main reasons behind the build up of hazardous wastes in the agricultural and health sector. Poor storage leads to loss of quality and inadequate transportation to unwanted contaminations. At the user's level, the prevailing inadequacy between demand and supply – notably in the case of large imports of pesticides and drug donations – are the origin of the unnecessary build up of chemical stocks. These excessive volumes become obsolete, as in the case of outdated medical drugs.

The presence and inadequate disposal of hazardous wastes from agriculture and health pose public health risks, via direct exposure by consumption of outdated and/or substandard drugs, or indirectly via environmental pollution affecting the quality of water and food. Examples from India and Myanmar were discussed.

Medical wastes are a serious health threat in most SEAR countries, as they are often ill-managed at all stages of their life cycle and are generally disposed of by inadequate incineration. More capacity

building and awareness need to be implemented in a big way. The agricultural sector and the health sector are called to act urgently, in a coordinated manner.

Important emphasis was put on the huge challenges that accumulated pharmaceutical wastes from post tsunami donations created in Indonesia. The several hundred tons of outdated drugs, stored in poor conditions represent two main risks for human health: illegal sale and consumption of substandard drugs stocks by unwary patients and potential environmental pollution from either leakage or unmonitored destruction. Participants concluded that the existing WHO guidelines need urgent revision.

The new WHO policies on “Sound management of Health Care Wastes” and on Mercury in the Health sector” were presented and discussed. Participants took note of the WHO’s proposed step by step approach which prioritizes the reduction, segregation, sound handling and treatment of all medical wastes. The policies were found to be useful to increase the quality of HCWM practices, also because they promote the use of non incineration systems and mercury free medical devices in the long term.

Obsolete pesticide stockpiles pose serious threats to health and the environment. To avoid high removal costs (up to 4500 USD per tonne) and technically complex operations, countries must put in place measures to prevent the accumulation of obsolete pesticides. Prevention programmes should be of equal status to initiatives for obsolete pesticide disposal and should be adequately funded in national projects.

At the same time, understanding that pesticides will continue to be used, prevention programmes should address the entire life cycle management of pesticides from their manufacture or import, through distribution, use and waste management after use. Preventing the accumulation of hazardous wastes also encompasses initiatives that aim at reducing reliance on pesticide use, in agriculture and in the health sector. Implementing low external input production systems and applying the principles of integrated pest management or IPM and/or other less pesticide dependant cropping systems, are key to prevent the accumulation of obsolete pesticide stocks. The health sector is called upon to implement similar approaches to manage disease vectors via integrated vector management or IVM. The features of an IPM/IVM pilot project in Sri Lanka were presented and its preliminary results applauded.

Responding to the express need for capacity building, a representative of the Indira Gandhi Open University — IGNOU offered an overview of the now available 6 month distance learning certificate course on sound health care waste management. Participants can enroll through national study centres for a fee of 400 US\$. Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka showed interest in setting up a study centre in Colombo. Several countries at the workshop showed interest in updating their existing national system to manage chemicals from cradle to grave, to review options for treatment and final disposal. Bhutan declared interest in preparing its national profile, and will ask SEARO for support.

The participants elaborated a set of 20 recommendations requesting national authorities, and in particular the health and agriculture sectors, to implement systems that lead to the sound management of chemicals and to closely coordinate for awareness campaigns on the health risks inked

to hazardous wastes. Countries in the region are called to implement pest and vector management schemes that rely less on pesticide use. Health sector is asked for boosting capacity building, also making use of the availability of the IGNOU distance learning course on HCWM. Agriculture is encouraged to seek assistance and guidance from FAO to carry out national inventories of obsolete pesticide stocks. Both sectors are called upon to guarantee the delivery of the needed funding, WHO and FAO are asked to support this process. The participants singled out two urgent matters: call for immediate national, regional and international action to reduce mercury containing medical devices and for halting excessive drug donations in and after emergencies. Finally, the participants call for stronger pro active regional collaboration, making best use of the existing regional human and technical capacities.