



Executive Summary

The following report is based on a three-day deliberation held amongst 50 participants from 12 countries at an interregional workshop on heavy metals. The workshop was sponsored jointly by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi, the USA Embassy in New Delhi, India, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) USA, and the World Health Organization, Regional Office for South-East Asia (WHO/SEARO).

It was decisive that the workshop was intersectoral with representation that included health professionals, scientific experts, government policy-makers, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and International Governmental Organizations (IGOs), to jointly address environmental health impacts from metals in South Asia. Such a discussion, helped different sectors to learn from the existing knowledge and take it forward as a cross-cutting focus for human health concerns.

The workshop allowed sensitizing health professionals and policy-makers in South Asia on the public health dimensions of environmental and human health impacts of various metals. Regional case studies of human health exposure to metals were presented and main elements of a framework to develop and implement national and regional action plans were worked out.

This timely workshop reflected the growing concern amongst the international community on the impacts of heavy metals on environmental health and the lack of urgency in dealing with the problem. Several heavy metals have become centres of concern, such as arsenic in drinking water, cadmium in food, lead in the air, or mercury in small-scale gold mining, health sector, fish and other food, as case studies of their impacts are coming forth. Simultaneously, in the international policy arena, heavy metals have been considered as pollutants of concern including at the UNEP Governing Council.





The programme addressed human and environmental impacts from exposure to four heavy metals in specific settings, aiming at defining mitigating and preventive actions. The metals focused upon were: arsenic, mercury, cadmium and lead. The workshop was based on presentations of local case studies (mainly from Thailand and Indonesia) related to metal exposure in the household, to occupational risks and to metal contamination of crops. The case studies were preceded by brief formal presentations on toxicology, epidemiology, and analytical issues. The speakers and participants discussed the issues and jointly prepared draft action plans and proposed a framework to develop and implement them at national and regional levels.

The participants and speakers came from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Sweden, Germany, and the USA. A set of recommendations for follow-up action emerged from the workshop and serves as a priority setting list for helping to mitigate and avoid these impacts, taking into account current science and policy focuses on the issue.

The outcomes of the workshop were multifold. Probably for the first time in South Asia, it helped to foster a discussion amongst multiple stakeholders who need to learn and take the issue forward jointly as one of human health concerns. The hope is that this will carry forward to translate into various types of action on the ground. More formally, the workshop drew up a series of recommendations, for each heavy metal discussed, as a priority list for further engagement. The purpose of this document is to obtain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of heavy metals in the environment and their potential interaction with human health. It contains summarized information and a set of recommendations intended as a call to action.

