

UN calls for action to reduce health and environmental risks posed by use of chemicals



Chemical 'intensification' of economies in developing countries means greater risk of exposure to hazardous substances. Photo: UNEP

5 September 2012 – Governments must urgently act to reduce the health and environmental hazards posed by the increase in use of chemicals in industries worldwide, says a United Nations report launched today, which stresses that more sustainable management policies are needed to address this growing risk.

Produced by the UN Environment Programme ([UNEP](#)), the *Global Chemicals Outlook* report argues that a shift in the production, use and disposal of chemical products from developed to

developing countries has made it essential to establish better management policies to avoid diseases and pollution caused by weak regulations.

“Communities worldwide – particularly those in emerging and developing countries – are increasingly dependent on chemical products, from fertilizers and petrochemicals to electronics and plastics, for economic development and improving livelihoods,” said UNEP’s Executive Director, Achim Steiner, in a [news release](#).

“But the gains that chemicals can provide must not come at the expense of human health and the environment. Pollution and disease related to the unsustainable use, production and disposal of chemicals can, in fact, hinder progress towards key development targets by affecting water supplies, food security, well-being or worker productivity,” Mr. Steiner said, adding that improving chemicals management is a vital component for countries to transition into a green economy.

The report highlights not just the damaging consequences to the environment and human health, but also the economic burden of treating chemical poisoning for many countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the estimated costs of poisonings from pesticides now exceeds the total annual overseas development aid given to the region for basic health services, excluding HIV/AIDS.

From Sudan and Ecuador, to bigger economies such as China and the United States, the costs of pesticide poisoning, water pollution, and toxic waste, among other issues, are not being borne by manufacturers and industries, but by social welfare systems and individuals, the report notes. It calls for sustainable chemical management policies not just to combat these costs, but also to improve livelihoods and develop green technologies.

“The economic analysis presented in the Global Chemicals Outlook demonstrates that sound chemicals management is as valid an area as education, transport, infrastructure, direct health care services and other essential public services,” said the World Health Organization’s ([WHO](#)) Director for Public Health and Environment, Maria Neira, in a news release. “This could foster the creation of many green, decent and healthy jobs and livelihoods for developed and developing countries.”

Some of the recommendations put forward by the report include the integration of chemicals management into national social and economic plans, the development of policies focused on risk prevention and promotion of safer alternatives, and encouraging the private sector to play a more active role in development safety policies in conjunction with governments.

“To harness the economic benefits of sound chemicals management, closer cooperation and better planning is required between government ministries, public and private sectors, and others in the chemicals supply chain,” Mr. Steiner said.

“This requires broad and ambitious efforts, underpinned by strategic financing. Such action can elevate chemicals management to the top of the international policy agenda and help deliver inclusive sustainable development,” he added.

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