

**TRADE UNION AFRICAN CONFERENCE
ON LABOUR AND THE ENVIRONMENT
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Working Group III

**HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES IN THE WORKPLACE
AND THE COMMUNITIES**

Chemicals permeate all of our lives. The proliferation of thousands of chemicals and related substances since the Industrial Revolution has yielded enormous benefits; indeed, modern society could not function without them. Unfortunately, the production and use of synthetic chemicals is also responsible for a growing number of environment and human health problems, as well as making increasingly unsustainable demands on our natural resource base.

These negative effects are compounded by a dire lack of knowledge regarding their inherent properties, environmental and human risks, as the effect of industrial processes spills over from workplace into community environments, where chemicals are known to cause damage to reproductive, nervous, cardiovascular or respiratory systems, as well as causing allergies, asthma and skin diseases. Long-term effects and low-dose chronic exposures, such as those that cause cancer, must be of special concern, particularly in developing and transition economies where the knowledge and capacity gaps to deal with chemicals are enormous.

Each day, each of us migrates from one “chemical cocktail” to another, depending on where we work and live. Biologically persistent, slow-degrading or slow-spreading agents are dispersed via wind or water.

African workers and communities face numerous challenges regarding chemicals. First, they deal with many risks that are already endangering their health:

- Increasing use in Africa of severely hazardous chemicals – carcinogens endocrine disruptors, asbestos, organophosphorous and carbamate pesticides (cholinesterase inhibitors)
- Stockpiles of obsolete pesticides and associated waste which seriously threaten the health of both rural and urban populations in every African country, and contribute to land degradation and water pollution. These stocks are a problem mostly for two reasons: 1) they are often stored in deteriorating containers such that pesticide spills and leaks are likely to occur in the future, and 2) they may actually be used for pest control when stocks of preferred pesticides are exhausted. Some of the unwanted stocks, especially chlorinated hydrocarbon insecticides, have been stored for about 30 years, and in many cases, the origin is not documented and labels are missing or no longer legible. Unwanted pesticide stocks can be quite large and thus present logistical storage problems.
- Proliferation of empty containers. The primary concern about empty pesticide barrels is the high demand for their use by the general public as storage containers, including for food and water. In some cases, empty barrels have been sold on the market despite the fact that this practice is unsafe.

These risks are also reinforced by the lack of information available to the large public regarding chemicals. Access to information (through labelling, posters, public campaigns) and public

participation in decision-making (following the principles stated in the Aarhus Convention)—, as well as workers' and community monitoring seem essential to reduce risks and to build consensus around measures that should be taken in this area. Just transition strategies are needed to ensure that workers won't pay the burden for transition towards a more sustainable chemicals management.

The agenda for sustainable approaches to chemicals must accommodate a number of concurrent responses. Time-bound goals must be established for the phase-out of most hazardous chemicals, guaranteeing a just transition. At the same time, industry must be required to provide much more environmental and health information and encouraged to respect the "polluter pays principle". Certain key notions that trade unions have insisted on for decades must be put into policy and practice: e.g., the precautionary principle, clean production, best available techniques, and best environmental practice are just a few. Substitution and the avoidance of emissions, discharges or loss of hazardous substances must become much more evident as the signs of a safe and sustainable approach to the management of chemicals.

Key playing fields and actions Trade Unions:

At the international level

- Enhance TU knowledge of international processes, like SAICM, and evaluate possibilities for concrete action within it, i.e. accessing funds from the Quick Start Programme.
- Reinforce TU participation in ongoing processes and request for workers' representation in their Secretariats, i.e.: IFCS, SAICM, PIC, POPs Secretariats
- Integrate TU activities within global frameworks, i.e. Projects on Sound Management of Chemicals.
- Play an active role on Global Campaigns against asbestos, endosulfan, paraquat, etc.

At the sub regional and regional levels

- Lobby for an African or sub-African harmonisation of legislations and policies.
- Request and lobby for streamlining chemical / OSH issues in programmes, projects, budgets, meetings, etc.
- Lobby for appointment of focal points in NEPAD, EU, ECOWAS, EAC, SADC, COMESA.

At the national level

- TU should lobby for the review of legislation and policies and for the design of a National Plan on Sound Management of Chemicals, which must count on TU and civil society participation.
- Reinforce the role of inspections as a means of strengthening TU and workers' participation.
- Develop a National Database of chemicals.
- TU should lobby for the ratification of relevant instruments regarding chemicals management and use.
- Mandatory registers must be put in place, and TU should increase the pressure for immediate action on this matter.

At the local/enterprise level

- Promote capacity building and training among trade unions, workers and communities to understand the hazards and risks of chemicals and participate in their prevention.
- Strengthen TU Monitoring of hazardous substances - POPs, PIC listed, Ecotoxicity- as well as Compliance with national legislation, international instruments, hazardous child labour (HCL), etc.
- Design Empty Container Management schemes - puncturing, take - back, return to sender, etc.
- Promote the use of biological agents to reclaim soils and waters polluted by substances hazardous to human health and/or the environment (bioremediation), i.e. constructed wetlands.