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UN CHEMICALS AGREEMENT NOT ON TRACK TO MEET GOALS BY 2020

Chemicals use growing faster than controls

(Nairobi, Kenya) International efforts to develop a global plan for the safe management of chemicals are not on track and unlikely to meet the goal of minimizing chemicals' adverse health and environmental impacts by 2020, IPEN representatives said at the start of the 3rd International Conference on Chemicals Management.

Citing its long term commitment to the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) and the 300 projects which it has completed as part of the process, Manny Calonzo, IPEN Co-chair, said: "Right now, SAICM is not on track to achieve the 2020 goal, because chemicals production and use is growing faster than our regulatory and enforcement efforts." Calonzo noted that, "NGOs can identify problem areas, be a catalyst for change and even make substantial contributions, but they cannot, by themselves, solve this problem. All the other actors must step up and accelerate the process if we are to achieve our goal."

"The chemical industry is growing fast, especially in developing countries and in countries with economies in transition. And the costs to people and the environment are growing right along with the industry. For example, according to the United Nations Environment Programme, the costs of injuries due to pesticide poisoning in sub-Saharan Africa during a four year period are estimated to be USD $6.2 billion – more than all of the international aid spent in that region. That does not make sense and it is an indicator that we are not yet turning this situation around," Calonzo added.

Calonzo identified five areas for action to get SAICM back on track:

More political will. Sound chemicals management needs to become a priority at the highest levels of government. Until government leaders fully commit, ministries responsible for chemical safety will continue to experience limited budgets, poor coordination among agencies, inadequate or absent regulation and enforcement and a lack of capacity for chemical safety implementation.

Private sector responsibility. The public funds that governments need to ensure that chemicals are safely managed and used should ultimately come from the chemical producing industries that profit

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from sales of chemicals. The chemical industry can afford this because it is among the richest in the world, with annual global sales of $4 trillion US dollars. According to UNEP, the vast majority of human health costs linked to chemical production, consumption and disposal are not borne by chemical producers, or shared down the value-chain. Instead, human suffering strains healthcare systems while individuals and governments struggle to pay the costs. A responsible, sustainable industry should internalize these costs.

An end to blocking meaningful decisions for action. When problems and solutions are identified, private sector interests and governments sometimes block agreements and subsequent actions to continue profitable business-as-usual harmful practices. For example, even though various solutions to e-waste are widely known, 20 – 50 million tonnes of e-waste from developed countries are dumped in Africa and Asia each year. Electronic products should be designed so that they are not manufactured with hazardous substances in the first place.

A preventative approach: Prevention should be the priority in chemicals regulatory policy rather than controlling or remediating risks. Doing nothing is the most expensive option, as we have seen again and again in the costs of after-the-fact environmental cleanups.

Safer alternatives should be systematically substituted for hazardous materials. A proactive approach to chemical safety would continuously investigate and substitute safer non-chemical and chemical alternatives that do not harm human health and the environment. For example, ecological agriculture methods can play a key role in the phase-out of highly hazardous pesticides.

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