



Joint press release by Oeko-Institut, PAN-Ethiopia, CREPD-Cameroon, CJGEA-Kenya and AGENDA-Tanzania
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The deadly business of lead recycling – now on the agenda of the United Nations

When the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) meets in Nairobi on Monday, its agenda will include one of the new and major health and environmental hazards facing many African countries today: the recovery of lead from waste batteries. In sub-Saharan countries, in particular, unsound recycling practices cause severe and even fatal lead poisoning of the people working in and living around small and industrial-scale lead smelters, including children. This is just one of the findings of the broad cooperation project initiated by Oeko-Institut that involved African environmental organisations in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania.

In the course of the project, the experts found that operations in industrial recycling businesses often involve rudimentary techniques and lack workplace safety precautions. The team compiled country-level information on smelters and recycling practices in order to raise awareness of the issues among policy-makers.

Establishing standards in African states and putting them into practice

The international team's key conclusion is that the governmental and supervisory authorities in the countries need to take strong steps to enforce standards for environmentally sound lead-acid battery recycling that are in line with human health principles. The rules should not be defined anew for each individual country. "It would rather make sense if such standards were applied globally – international organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have a major role to play here", notes Tadesse Amara, the director of PAN-Ethiopia.

In most African countries workers and residents living around lead smelters are not aware of the extreme health risks emanating from such facilities at all. This is because the symptoms of lead poisoning are usually thought to be signs of an infectious disease. "That is why the true causes of high rates of disease often remain concealed", says Diana Mathai of CJGEA, the Kenya Center for Justice, Governance and Environmental Action. "Things only started moving when we began to educate the affected communities about the risks and built the capacity of state and non-state actors on lead poisoning. Seventeen battery recyclers in Kenya have been closed since then. That is an important first step, but we are still struggling with many contaminated sites and unregulated battery recycling."

At the same time, the experts see further health risks to even larger sections of the population that have scarcely gained any attention so far. This is because some of the contaminated materials extracted from battery recycling processes are used to manufacture consumer products – such as water tanks or chairs. "In Cameroon, some of the lead is even mixed with

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aluminium to make artisanal cooking pots”, says Gilbert Kuepouo of CREPD, Cameroon’s Research and Education Centre for Development. “So we must assume that large parts of the population ingest a certain daily dose of the heavy metal. For children, in particular, this can cause lifelong damage.” In Tanzania, too, the situation is serious: “We have started to inform the population and government authorities about the risks”, says Silvani Mng’anya of AGENDA for Environment and Responsible Development (AGENDA) in Tanzania. “But positive change needs time. We hope that the UN Environment Assembly sends out a clear signal and adopts an effective resolution.”

Europe’s industry: Supply chain due diligence needed

More than 800,000 tonnes of lead from discarded batteries arise in Africa every year. Usually, there is no industrial application for the heavy metal within the country. As a result, most of the material is exported – mainly to lead smelters in Europe and Asia who then supply the manufacturers of car batteries.

“The big buyers of lead – such as the European automobile industry – should assume responsibility for their supply chain”, says Andreas Manhart, senior researcher at Oeko-Institut. “Some are already doing this, but mostly just by making demands upon their direct suppliers. The first links in the chain are largely ignored. Industry should adopt much stricter standards in this regard.”

About the Lead Recycling Africa Project

Oeko-Institut launched the Lead Recycling Africa Project in late 2014, based on donations collected through a dedicated fundraising campaign. The purpose of cooperation within the project among partner organisations in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania was to raise the profile of the issue – both locally and internationally – and to define solutions for sustainable lead-acid battery recycling. The donated funds were passed through directly to environmental activists in the countries, thus allowing them to carry out the essential research, analyses and awareness-raising work.

Further information:

[Website with all the outcomes and publications of the Lead Recycling Africa Project by Oeko-Institut, PAN-Ethiopia, CREPD-Cameroon, CJGEA-Kenya and AGENDA-Tanzania](#)

[Brochure: "The deadly business – Findings from the Lead Recycling Africa Project"](#)

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About Oeko-Institut

Oeko-Institut is a leading independent European research and consultancy institute working for a sustainable future. Founded in 1977, the institute develops principles and strategies for ways in which the vision of sustainable development can be realised globally, nationally and locally. It has offices in three cities in Germany: Freiburg, Darmstadt and Berlin.

www.oeko.de | twitter.com/oekoinstitut

About PAN-Ethiopia

Pesticide Action Nexus Association of Ethiopia (PAN-Ethiopia) is a non-governmental organization established to work on environment and development to contribute to the eradication of poverty in Ethiopia through raising the awareness of the public in order to prevent the public health and environmental impacts of pesticides and other hazardous chemicals. Its main purpose is to enhance and promote a safe and sustainable environment protected from harm posed by hazardous chemicals by promoting the close collaboration of government, non-governmental organizations; civil



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society interest groups, urban and rural communities in Ethiopia and beyond.

About Research and Education Centre for Development – Cameroon

CREPD is a Cameroon based Health and Environmental NGO aiming to bridge the gap between Science and Action in Sub-Sahara Africa and beyond. CREPD is a unique NGO within Cameroon since 2004 with a technical scientific background that is well respected as a resource for government ministries on chemicals management issues. The organization serves on a number of advisory committees and has an excellent working relationship with government, research institutions and other stakeholders.

www.crepdcameroun.org

About AGENDA for Environment and Responsible Development – Tanzania

AGENDA is a non-governmental, non-profit sharing organization (NGO) was established in 1994 as a three years project with the aim to contribute to the sustainable development of the business sector by promoting environmentally responsible, transparent and accountable business practices in Tanzania and registered as an autonomous NGO in 1997. AGENDA's mission is to promote a culture of responsibility to the environment amongst the general public through awareness, advocacy, capacity building and stakeholders' involvement in Tanzania and beyond.

www.agenda-tz.org

About Kenya Center for justice governance and Environmental Action

CJGEA is a registered non-profit and non-governmental organization based in Mombasa, Kenya working for the realization of environmental and human rights of the economically marginalized communities residing around extractive industries in the Kenyan Coastal region. The challenges being faced by these marginalized communities led to the need to address human rights, policy change and environmental governance issues. CJGEA's operations are guided by its constitution and is overseen by its board of governors drawn from the civil society in Kenya and Internationally. Our mission is mainstreaming a human rights based approach to environmental protection of marginalized and ignored communities around extractive industries.

www.centerforjgea.com



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