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Attn: News, Business, Tech Editors

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Internal Samsung documents show electronics sold globally are produced with irresponsible chemicals management and pollution of Vietnam’s environment

New [report](#) finds Samsung’s manufacturing in Vietnam has threatened the health of workers and surrounding communities

(Seoul, South Korea): Despite global use of consumer electronics and chemical-intensive manufacturing processes, the harsh realities of electronics manufacturing have largely been hidden from public sight. Now for the first time, an industry insider has stepped forward as a whistleblower, providing internal documents and photos revealing Samsung’s polluting operations, worker health and safety issues, poor management, outsourcing of harm, double standards, and violations of UN human rights principles.

The whistleblower’s findings are revealed in an unprecedented, detailed [study](#) released today by Supporters for the Health and Rights of Workers in the Semiconductor Industry (SHARPS) in South Korea, the Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED) in Vietnam, and IPEN. The whistleblower worked for forty years as a manager of environmental, health and safety at Samsung and spent years conducting internal investigations of the company’s factories and suppliers in Vietnam from 2012 – 2021, documenting polluting operations continuing to the present.

“Samsung and its suppliers have demonstrated deep disrespect for Vietnam’s environment and its workers,” said Ms. Pham Thi Minh Hang, CGFED. “Samsung should fulfill the [right](#) to safe and healthy environment and support the [right](#) to form independent trade unions by advocating for Vietnam’s ratification of ILO Convention 87 instead of lobbying against it.”

Samsung Electronics dominates the electronics industry in Vietnam where it manufactures appliances and approximately half of its mobile phones globally. The majority of the [electronics industry workforce](#) in Vietnam is made up of women working in assembly lines. A [survey](#) of women workers at Samsung mobile phone factories in 2017 reported fainting, feeling dizzy, miscarriage, high noise levels, and poor knowledge of chemical safety.

Key report findings:

Severe air and water pollution: A lack of toxic wastewater treatment and incorrect air pollution control design and operation resulted in years of pollution. Samsung addressed the air pollution issue by outsourcing its most toxic operations to its suppliers in 2017 – continuing serious pollution in other communities to the present day.

Worker exposure: The company’s Bac Ninh factory, known as [the largest foreign direct investment factory](#) in Vietnam, lacked local exhaust systems in areas where toxic chemicals were used, so workers were routinely exposed to toxic chemical fumes.

Double standards in foreign vs. domestic operations: Samsung has not publicly reported chemical releases in Vietnam while complying with South Korean laws that require public reporting of hundreds of substances through the country’s pollutant release and transfer registry (PRTR) system.

Management indifference: The whistleblower provided detailed reports about Samsung’s severe air and water pollution problems at the company’s Bac Ninh plant in Vietnam in 2012, but top-level managers at company headquarters remained silent.

Internal coverup: Samsung’s Global Environmental Health and Safety Center at company headquarters found serious violations of company policy at the Bac Ninh factory but in its routine reports, it gave top marks to the facility for air pollution control and wastewater treatment. This contradiction suggests that the role of the Center is to give the appearance of good management while ignoring problems revealed by Samsung’s own inspections.

External coverup: Samsung has effectively used its sustainability reports to hide the results of its own investigations. For example, the company publicly states that toxic wastewater is only discharged after processing to remove pollutants, but for years Samsung’s factory in Bac Ninh did not even have a wastewater treatment facility and just dumped it directly into the environment. Samsung’s sustainability reports have mentioned positive findings of third-party audits of their suppliers but have hidden nearly 13,000 compliance violations at its suppliers in Vietnam as identified by the company’s own internal investigations over a four-year period.

Poor management of suppliers: In 2023, 37 workers at a Samsung Vietnam supplier were [poisoned](#) with methanol. Samsung bans only 2 chemicals in its factories and suppliers and only [partially regulates](#) 23 others, including methanol. The company’s weak chemical policy is further undermined by Samsung’s use of self-evaluation by suppliers which allows them to obtain a good score and more contracts by concealing use of banned chemicals.

Undermining right to know: In Vietnam, the public does not have information about chemical releases from factories or the results of regulatory agency investigations. Samsung’s internal investigations have found that workers often do not know what substances they are using or their dangers. In South Korea, Samsung successfully advocated for prohibiting disclosure of health and safety information and the National Assembly passed the [Industrial Technology Protection Act](#) which places broad-ranging constraints on the disclosure and use of information including data concerning possible harms to safety in the workplace.

Independent trade unions absent: In Vietnam, independent trade unions are outlawed. Samsung has [actively lobbied](#) against Vietnam’s ratification of [ILO conventions](#) that guarantee freedom of association, arguing that independent trade unions would harm the country’s political stability.

Samsung Electronics violates human rights by externalizing the costs of pollution from mobile phone and appliance production onto Vietnam’s communities, environment, and workers. This includes the human right to a [clean, healthy, and sustainable environment](#); the right to a [safe and healthy working environment](#); children’s right to live in a [clean, healthy, and sustainable environment](#); and the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), among other [human rights principles](#) outlined in UN Special Rapporteur reports. Samsung should publicly release a list of chemicals used in its facilities and independent health studies should be used to understand the extent of the occupational health impacts on workers and develop preventive measures to avoid toxic chemical exposure.

“Behind Samsung’s shiny external image is a polluting company that disregards the negative findings of its environmental health and safety inspections and then covers them up with upbeat sustainability reports,” said Mr. Sangsoo Lee, MS, SHARPS. “While we encourage more whistleblowers to come forward, we should not have to depend on them to provide the truth about company operations. That is why South Korea urgently needs to pass a rigorous [law](#) requiring human rights and environmental due diligence for corporations.”

“Samsung’s internal investigations show its management is unwilling or unable to carry out its public human rights commitments,” said Mr. Joe DiGangi, PhD, IPEN Special Advisor. “Policymakers, regulators, and health advocates should be working to ensure that the grim history of pollution, occupational illness and death in the South Korean electronics industry is not repeated in Vietnam, India, Indonesia, Brazil or in any other country.”

“Community residents and workers have a fundamental right to talk about their living and working conditions and they deserve to have their voices heard,” said Ms. Pham Thi Minh Hang, CGFED. “If Samsung is fully confident about its factory operations and working conditions, it should issue a public statement together with the Government of Vietnam, that workers are free to discuss their working conditions with the news media and civil society organizations.”

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Supporters for the Health and Rights of People in the Semiconductor Industry (SHARPS) supports the recognition of occupational diseases for victims in the semiconductor and electronics industries, monitors and investigates the corporate working environment, and works to improve health and safety policies including right to know.

Founded in 1993, the **Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED)** has been carrying out social scientific research and intervention activities, targeting at women's development and gender equality. As one among the first Vietnamese public interest NGOs, CGFED is proud of its work building the foundation and the development of a young NGO community among members of the Vietnamese civil society.

IPEN is a network of non-governmental organizations working in more than 100 countries to reduce and eliminate the harm to human health and the environment from toxic chemicals.