

SAICM Statement

Chemicals constitute a part of our daily life, and have contributed to the improvement of living conditions. But it is also an established fact that some chemicals may cause irreversible damage to the environment and the health of workers and consumers. So there is a need to ban some chemicals or severely restrict the use of them, and there is a need for regulation and rules to ensure that chemicals in use are used in a sound and safe way both for the environment and health.

We recognize that chemicals are not always used in a sustainable manner and there is a need to do more including the development of regulation and control of chemicals. Specifically, issues such as bridging the knowledge gap, the effective implementation of the principles of precaution and substitution, development and marketing of green chemicals and processes, and the development of research, assessment and prevention regarding multiple exposures to chemical risks need to be addressed.

However, the situation in many parts of the world is that there is a more general lack of knowledge, regulation and control with regard to the sound and safe use of chemicals. This is a major problem for consumers, for workers, and for the environment in these countries, but it also poses threats for the global environment when the chemicals in use are biologically persistent or degrade slowly and are globally spread via wind or water.

As the standard of living is improved in developing and newly restructuring countries, they will produce and use more chemicals than now. Even today, there are companies from within the chemical sector and other sectors using chemicals that have moved a number of their operations from developed countries to developing or newly restructuring countries. Often knowledge of chemical risks and hazards together with regulation and control is less developed in these countries. So there is a major need for the international community to help to raise the standard of education, training, regulation and control in these countries to the same high standard as in developed countries in order to help set developing and newly restructuring countries on a sustainable path and avoid environmental and social dumping.

To establish a practical global strategy capable of meeting these goals therefore requires that all countries develop and implement national policy, regulation and control systems for chemicals, and have a coherent and effective chemical policy and regulation of a standard such as to ensure the sustainable production, use and disposal of chemicals. We regard this as the first priority issue for SAICM. This requires giving effect to the Earth Summit goal: "sound management of chemicals throughout their life cycle and of hazardous wastes for sustainable development and for the protection of human health and the environment, inter alia, aiming to achieve by 2020 that chemicals are used and produced in ways that lead to the minimization of significant adverse effects on human health and the environment."

The main aim of these national plans should be the achievement of an adequate framework for the prevention of chemical risks and the sustainable management of chemicals. The criteria and elements necessary for the development of these plans should include, amongst other things: phase-out goals for the most undesirable chemicals; full industry accountability (including providing all relevant environmental and health information and guaranteeing the polluter pays principle); the precautionary principle; promoting clean production; best available techniques and best environmental practice; implementing the principle of substitution; avoiding emissions, discharges and losses of hazardous substances; ensuring the safe management of chemicals.

Particular attention needs to be paid to the support that will be required by developing countries and countries in economic transition. The development of national policies for use, regulation and control of chemicals should be based on a holistic approach and requires cooperation – to a much greater extent than has historically been the case – between and amongst ministries responsible for different sectors such as those responsible for environment, labour, health, food safety, industry, finance and agriculture. This has proven difficult even in developed countries, and the challenge is certainly not going to be less elsewhere. Moreover, it is well established that regulation on its own is not sufficient, and it is vital that it is backed up with effective monitoring and control systems.

It might be of great help if SAICM could produce guidelines for these processes, singling out key issues, pointing to pitfalls and giving examples of how this has been successfully achieved. It might also be useful for guidance and assistance to be given on the setting up of networks among developing countries and between developed and developing countries in order to foster the necessary cooperation. It is crucial to underline the importance of the contribution from developed countries to such networks with knowledge, experience and financial and other resources if such cooperation is to work effectively. Business and trade unions would be more than willing to participate in this.

The relevant conventions addressing chemical safety are mostly signed and ratified by developed countries. They are important tools in developed countries especially for environmental and health concerns of a global nature. They are also needed in developing countries for addressing the challenges that they currently face or can be expected to face as they develop, and it will become more and more important from a global perspective that they also be ratified and implemented in developing countries. Global threats require global actions.

We regard it as a high priority for SAICM to establish and promote a global strategy for helping developing countries ratify and implement the most important of these international conventions and protocols. To achieve this it might be of help again to create networks between developing countries as well as between developed and developing countries.

The main priority for SAICM should be to build a framework that guarantees the effective implementation worldwide of all current global chemical goals (as expressed at the Earth Summit, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in international conventions, etc) and through an integrated approach to optimise and coordinate the necessary efforts and resources for effective national plans. In order to achieve these goals the necessary mechanisms must be identified along with ensuring the contribution of resources from the private sector, along with the governments and IGOs.

It is also necessary to point to the fact that there is still a major lack of knowledge-regarding the environmental and health effects of chemicals. There is, for this reason, a need for continuing and improved research, monitoring, investigation, and analysis to extend our knowledge regarding environmental and health effects of chemicals, so as to be able to identify priorities for the future and make use of scarce resources as effectively as possible. . Success will depend on the commitment of human and financial resources that one can hardly expect developing countries to provide on their own. We therefore urge developed countries to take immediate steps to strengthen their efforts in improving the global knowledge base as well as developing international mechanisms for the exchange of chemical data, etc. There already exist competent bodies and forums for doing this; some regional such as the EU, OECD, etc.; others global such as ILO, WHO, UNEP etc. Here there are both resources and networks suitable for addressing the necessary tasks and we believe that these resources will be most effectively used when the various actors cooperate on the basis of a well defined strategy developed through the SAICM process

*(Final draft following detailed comments and input
from Estefania Blount, Bjorn Erikson and Reg Green)*