



IFCS

Agenda 21 Chemicals Management: Linkages and Priorities:

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Forum II

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Agenda 21 Chemicals management: Linkages and priorities

Mr. Secretary Volpe, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have met here to review the progress since Forum I in Stockholm three years ago, and to draw up the broad lines for the next few years of work to reduce risks from chemicals in the world. I feel very privileged to have the honour to chair this meeting and will do my best to help us agree on actions and priorities in the coming week. A lot of work has been invested in preparing this meeting, including the two intersessional groups in Bruges and Canberra, and an intensive work by the ad hoc Working Group on the Agenda. I wish to thank all of those who have helped pave the way for this weeks meeting. In particular, I want to thank our host country, Canada, which has provided us with this impressive venue and made preparations in the finest detail, including providing us with parkas to permit us to enjoy a winter climate which will be a unique experience for some of us.

I will now give a brief overview of the threats and challenges which prompted the Rio conference and lead to Agenda 21, then put chemical safety into the picture and finally try to indicate the road ahead which we will discuss during the coming week.

Environment and development

A better survival

Agenda 21 revolves around two main issues: How do we ensure a better survival, and how do we secure the resource base which is necessary to survive? It contains 40 chapters with agreed actions to respond to these needs. The first issue, ensuring survival, must always be a top priority, and underpins the whole of Agenda 21. Conditions are very different from place to place, as very clearly illustrated by the median age at death, that is, the age below which half of all deaths occur in a year. In many parts of the world, this median age is exceedingly low around 5 years, whereas in the more affluent parts of the world it is above 75 years. The mean life expectancy is generally rising, however, typically with several years in the last decade even in the least developed countries. If such trends continue, there will still be large differences between countries a generation from now.

A resource base that is threatened

The second main issue is maintaining the resource base which we depend upon for our survival. During millennia, we have been able to intervene in nature on such a large scale that we threaten this base in the long term. For instance, irrigation of soils in the Near Orient two thousand years ago lead to decreased crop yields due to salination.

Today mankind intervenes on a much larger scale, sometimes with severe side effects. The area of arable land (Chapters 10, 12-14) and the fish catches from the seas (Chapter 17) are slightly increasing although not in pace with the population increase, and there is a limit to their productivity. Nutrients and toxic substances in large amounts are contaminating air and

water (Chapters 19-22). Metals such as cadmium, copper, lead, mercury and tin are globally produced in amounts which are many times higher than the amounts mobilised through natural processes such as weathering. This calls for further research to evaluate whether correspondingly enhanced levels could also occur in the biosphere in the long run, if present practices do not change. Persistent organic pollutants result from large-scale chemical use in many sectors of society. They have half-lives in soil up to a decade and are available from sediments much longer. This means that their levels, if present trends continue, would be expected to increase during the next generation and much later level off towards an equilibrium.

In the atmosphere (Chapter 9), greenhouse gases often have a residence time of a hundred years. A generation from now their contents will have increased by typically one-tenth if present trends continue, and much later they will approach equilibrium at a few times the present levels.

In other cases, the environmental capacity is already significantly impaired. The area covered by forests (Chapter 11) is decreasing and with it the biological diversity (Chapter 15) as measured by the loss of species. If present trends continue, we will have lost about one-tenth of all forests and of all species one generation from now, and most of the forests and species are threatened in a longer time perspective.

To sum up, if changes are not enacted the present situation will be aggravated a generation from now, with severe consequences at the local or regional level. Many of the problems experienced will have a global impact and their solution require global action. In a longer time perspective, even the overall global environment is at risk to be dramatically influenced, with for instance most of the forests and species disappearing and average levels of toxic natural or manmade substances multiplied.

Agenda 21 calls for action

Being aware of these concerns, countries agreed on extensive countermeasures five years ago in Rio, when Agenda 21 was conceived. Agenda 21 contains three sections. The first two deal with the two critical issues of survival and resources

I. Social and economic dimensions

II. Conservation and management of resources for development, which includes Chapter 19 on chemical safety: *Environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals including prevention of illegal international traffic in toxic and dangerous products*

In the third section, *Strengthening the role of major groups*, a major theme is that we all must join forces in the actions. The breadth of groups participating in the Forum bears witness that such actions are required not only from governments but also from non-governmental organisations (Chapter 27), workers and their trade unions (Chapter 29), business and industry (Chapter 30), and the scientific and technological community (Chapter 31). We will have a special session today with examples of activities of several of the participants in Forum, and for emphasis the theme of Forum II is "In Partnership for Global Chemical Safety".

The fourth section, *Means of implementation*, is critical to us, since Forum II is set up to discuss the implementation of Chapter 19. We will return to the issues of research (Chapter 35), information (Chapter 40) and education (Chapter 36), capacity building (Chapter 37) and transfer of technology (Chapter 34), funding (Chapter 33) and institutions (Chapter 38 and 39).

Chemical safety in Agenda 21

Chemical pollution and survival

The use of chemicals is essential for the survival addressed in Section I of Agenda 21. Without the use of pesticides, one-fourth to one-half of the present global agricultural production (Chapter 14) would have been lost, and millions of people would have died from parasitic diseases (Chapter 6). At the same time large-scale health effects are caused by insecticides in developing countries. According to a WHO Commission (1992) they cause more than two hundred thousand deaths annually. Chemical safety must thus involve a careful balance of benefits and risks. In addressing such balances at the local level, difficult choices arise that should be discussed with a broad community involvement, e.g. of local authorities (Chapter 28) and farmers (Chapter 32) and considering equity issues (Chapter 3).

Which role do then chemical health effects play over the globe? The World Bank and World Health Organisation have estimated the burden of disease which can be averted by feasible interventions against pollution (1993). They arrived at a few per cent, mainly through actions against air pollution and occupational exposures. Several times larger reductions were deemed possible through other, cheap measures such as immunisation and supplementation to children of food and vitamin A. Chemical safety is thus a contributing factor to improving survival in the short term, alongside major efforts towards combatting poverty (Chapter 3) and protecting health (Chapter 6). It also has an important function to address long-term and probably even unknown health effects from a wide range of chemicals, in line with the suggestions that dietary levels of some persistent organic pollutants may increase rates of infection, cancer, reproductive and developmental effects.

Chemical pollution and the resource base

As to the concern for ensuring the resource base addressed in Section II, chemical pollution is already changing the balance of the stratospheric ozone layer and the regional seas. It is a contributing factor to stress on the forests and other ecosystems, but the magnitude is difficult to assess. The longer we increase polluting activities, the more we will have to deal with areas of particularly high contamination. Increasingly, the focus will broaden to include other parts of the biosphere as well as man.

Linkages between program areas

It falls upon us as participants of the Forum to contribute to improved survival and secured resource bases by implementing the actions proposed in Agenda 21.

The chemical safety chapter (19) aims to

- ensure build-up of knowledge about chemical risks and capacity to manage them,
- eliminate unacceptable or unreasonable risks and reduce other risks to the extent economically feasible,
- prevent illegal international traffic in toxic and dangerous products, and
- establish what has now become our Forum.

Chapter 19 has a broad approach to chemical risks and calls for precautionary measures derived from a broad-based life-cycle analysis. Measures envisaged include promotion of cleaner products, management of manufacturing, emission inventories, product labelling, use limitations and disposal. In the Priorities for Action decided by Forum I, it was stated that chemical controls and pollution control initiatives should be closely integrated.

The measures are structured in six program areas. One of them concerns illegal trafficking. In keeping with the introduction and expansion of legislation by governments, this will be of growing concern but it is not dealt with in our present Agenda. The other five areas A - E will be dealt with extensively. But as time passes by, old activities will be seen from new angles, and new challenges will appear for us to deal with. Therefore, we have also an agenda item dealing with emerging issues.

As with most structures, there are overlaps or linkages between the five areas we are dealing with. Many such linkages can be traced in the papers prepared for Forum II and in the recent inventory of activities prepared by the Inter-Organisation Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals, IOMC (IOMC/IOCC 96.8, December 1996). For instance, information exchange (C) and capacity building (E) are related to all other areas.

Priority activities

During the week we will be discussing many proposals for actions by the Forum and their priorities. In those discussions, we must keep in mind the main brief of the Forum: To make recommendations to its participants, provide policy guidance, develop strategies, foster understanding and promote policy support. I wish to emphasise that it is up to you, the participants, to implement the recommendations. The Forum is not, I repeat *not* set up to make risk assessments, do harmonisation work, reduce risks or provide information programs and capacity building. These are tasks for Forum participants. What Forum does is recommend priorities, start processes, facilitate coordination and follow up its own work, and attempt to provide overarching leadership. These tasks require much less resources than the implementation. This is reflected in the Forum budget, which is around half a million US dollars per year.

The secretariat has a staff of only a few persons. During the past period Forum has co-funded and devoted staff time to *one* major activity besides the co-ordinating function: to promote the process on a global instrument to reduce the risks from persistent organic pollutants, POPs. The main expense was to convene an ad hoc working group, which depended on considerable funding from several governments. It is my judgment that besides its coordinating function, Forum can within the foreseeable funding at most manage one major undertaking. There are several resource demanding proposals for instance for ad hoc working groups before us. I will

insist that we set very clear priorities. In that way we will be able to carry through what we set out to do, as we have so amply demonstrated in the POPs case. Overall, our two intersessional group meetings have agreed on about 80 recommendations, and all but a few of those have been followed up by the Forum participants and the Secretariat before Forum II. Also, the goals set for 1997 have been met to a large extent. All but a few of 17 concrete targets can be expected to have been met by the end of the year.

When we reflect on priorities, we should also keep in mind what are the comparative advantages of the Forum in relation to other entities. To me, there are two such comparative advantages. The first is that we have a good dialogue between a very broad range of participants representing all sectors of society. The second is that we have a regional cooperation that is catching speed. I propose that we give priority to activities where we can use these two comparative advantages. In particular, I want to stress the need for further development of chemical safety in developing countries. Previous discussions have indicated the need to involve developing countries in all the areas A-F, from assessments of chemicals which have special priority for developing countries, through capacity building and actions against illegal trafficking. Regional cooperation can be a powerful tool to identify priorities and foster competence.

Linkages to other chapters

Before I conclude, I want to comment also on other chapters of Agenda 21 than Chapter 19. As I mentioned, Chapter 19 takes a very broad view on chemical safety. It is natural that it has many linkages also to others of the 40 chapters. I believe we can strengthen chemical safety by interacting with activities referring to some of those. In general, keeping track of and reducing the use and emissions of hazardous chemicals will have a beneficial influence on the management of pollution of the atmosphere, land and seas (Chapters 9-18), and facilitate waste management (Chapters 20-21). We have already taken advantage of the interest from such other areas. For instance, the work on protection of the seas (Chapter 17) helped on our way towards an international instrument reducing risks from persistent organic pollutants. And we are exploring distinct possibilities that the Global Environment Facility (Chapter 33) may help funding risk reducing measures for persistent organic pollutants in developing countries.

There are interesting linkages also to another concept which has been proposed after Rio. It starts from the realisation that one of the main reasons for the changed balance in nature today is the mobilisation of large amounts of materials. The Carnoules declaration 1994 states that it is a technically feasible goal over fifty years to cut in half present global non-renewable material flows, including minerals, fresh water and non-renewable energy carriers. This would require a political commitment to increase by an average of a factor 10 the average resource productivity of the presently industrialised countries. The concept is now being explored within the OECD. Such a change would in itself also reduce the flow of hazardous chemicals in many areas. As with many other measures necessary in the long term, the "factor 10" approach will require considering substantially changing consumption patterns (Chapter 4) in the affluent segments of the population.

The way ahead

To conclude, I have sketched our important mission to contribute to improve human survival and ensure our resource base in the long term. We have a unique task to set priorities for the activities until Forum III, facilitate coordination and follow up. We have important assets in the form of active participants representing a broad range of interests. We also have a unique potential to stimulate regional cooperation which is still in rapid development. There is also further ground to be gained by acting in concert with those responsible for other parts of Agenda 21 than Chapter 19.

In the end of this week we will decide on the focus of work until Forum III. We must clearly state what we set out to do if we are to get full support of all Forum partners for our activities. We must also summarise the most essential task –and solicit the support necessary to implement them at the highest international level: the United Nations General Assembly Special Session in June which has been convened as the five-year follow up of the Rio conference. We can be proud of our achievements but we must remain humble before the vast amount of work which must take place within the next generation.

Thank you for your attention.