



PERSISTENT ORGANIC POLLUTANTS

The Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants

Adopted on May 23, 2001

Open for signature until March 22, 2002

The convention is ratified by 2 countries (as of June 20, 2001), not yet in force, 50 ratifications are required

Problem

Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), so called because they persist for long periods in the environment without breaking down, are among the most dangerous pollutants produced by human activity. A large number of POPs such as dichlorodiphenyl trichlorethane (DDT) are used as pesticides or industrial chemicals, while others such as dioxins and furans are byproducts of waste disposal processes like incineration.

As POPs are stable, they can travel long distances through air and water from as far as the tropics, condensing as toxic rain and snow in Arctic ecosystems. Once POPs settle on land and waterbodies, they can cause serious health damage, from neurological disorders to weakening of the immune system, among other things. There is growing evidence that single or cumulative exposures to certain POPs can disrupt the endocrine (hormone producing) system that plays a critical role in growth and reproduction.

The convention

A group of Nordic countries pushed this convention, spurred by scientific evidence that their unspoiled Arctic regions were becoming a storehouse for POPs. Discussions moved speedily under the aegis of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). While designing the treaty, a 1998 regional agreement on POPs signed by the 42 members of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) was used as a precedent. This follows an emerging trend in global environmental negotiations where Northern countries negotiate a treaty amongst themselves, and then use it as a model for a global treaty that involves the participation of Southern countries.

The final treaty, signed in May 2001 and known as the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, will seek continuous minimisation, and where feasible, ultimate elimination of POPs. It encompasses an ambitious range of activities, including prohibiting and limiting production and use of POPs, restricting imports and exports preventing and regulating newly developed chemicals which exhibit POPs characteristics, and adopting measures to manage stockpiles containing POPs.

Moreover, in a boost to the precautionary principle, the convention strongly endorses the idea that action can be taken against POP substances, as long as there is scientific evidence that they pose a risk to human health and the environment, even without complete scientific certainty.

For now, the agreement will target only twelve POP candidates, known as the 'dirty dozen'. The dirty dozen includes pesticides such as DDT, industrial chemicals like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and byproducts of industrial processes, namely dioxin and furans. A Persistent Organic Pollutants Review Committee (POPRC), which will be established at the first Conference of the Parties (CoP-1), will consider additional candidates to be brought under the convention in the future.

But the question of taking a cleaner path will only be possible for Southern

ozone depletion

hazardous waste

prior informed consent

right to information

commission on

sustainable development

climate

biodiversity

desertification

persistent organic pollutants

forests

trade and environment

multilateral agreement

on investment

global environment facility

institutions for environment



Concrete action from national governments to fulfil their commitments on paper is the next part of the Persistent Organic Pollutants story. If its negotiation history is anything to go by, the future looks hopeful. Northern countries are eager to see results

countries if there is money available. In many Southern countries, POPs such as DDT are still the cheapest and most accessible measure to battle malaria. Therefore, DDT production and use are allowed for some countries that do not have locally safe, affordable alternatives in place to fight vector-borne diseases. In order to tackle the question of viable alternatives, UNEP has set up, among other measures, a resource database.

The cost of implementing the treaty's provisions in developing countries is estimated to be anywhere from US \$100 million to US \$200 million a year over a period of two decades or more. Therefore, the treaty mandates that industrialised countries shall provide new financial resources to developing countries to meet the full incremental costs of implementing measures which fulfil their obligations under the convention once the treaty comes into force.

Industrialised countries finally agreed to a new and separate financing mechanism under the convention. Developing countries also agreed on the use of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as the convention's temporary financing mechanism. Unlike MEAs focussing specially on concerns of developing countries, like the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which remains hampered due to lack of funds, this agreement was satisfactory to the South in terms of funding.

Cooperation with other multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs)

The Stockholm Convention will probably draw support from the few multilateral environmental agreements on chemicals that are already in place, including

The Aarhus Protocol on Persistent Organic Pollutants to the Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution Convention from June 1998, the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent (PIC) Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade from September 1998 and the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal from March 1989.

These MEAs, however, mainly concentrate on trade regulation rather than control at sources of production.

Challenges ahead

Taking the Stockholm Convention beyond the 'dirty dozen' will be no mean task. The crucial question of how to handle alternatives for possible future POP candidates

needs to be formulated within its forum. But the existing convention does not yet include a framework that elaborates on non-chemical alternative approaches to POP use, whether they be for agricultural or industrial purposes.

Concrete action from national governments to fulfil their commitments on paper is the next part of the POPs story. If its negotiation history is anything to go by, the future looks hopeful. As is often the case when Northern concerns are central, garnering 'international support' for the Stockholm Convention took little time, and negotiations happened quickly and effectively despite the various contentious issues.



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