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Concerted actions

# **ECE initiatives regarding the identification and reduction of risks related to the presence of obsolete chemicals in transition countries**

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## **Two contexts**

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) is an institution pursuing a large number of activities, not necessarily related one to another. Its work programme is decided and monitored by the Economic Commission of Europe, an assembly of the 55 ECE member countries in Europe and North America, and by the Committees of the Commission. Socio-economic transition problems, concerns encountered in industrial activities, risks of such activities, and the special features of the production, transport and use of chemical products are themes that occur in several connections. This note is limited to the coverage of ECE's work in two special work areas, in which obsolete pesticides and chemicals, as well as environmental decontamination from chemical wastes occupy an elevated place. They are the programme of Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs) included in the work mandated by the Committee on Environmental Policy, and the work of the Task Force on the Pilot Project on Soil Decontamination, as part of the chemical industry programme under the Committee for Trade, Industry and Enterprise Development.

## **Environmental Performance Reviews**

Such reviews have so far been published for eleven transition countries. Their purpose is to identify and describe environmental management and policy in these countries and to make recommendations to their environmental administrations that help them integrate European mainstream practices. The reviews are prepared by expert teams constituted for the purpose from ECE member countries and the ECE secretariat. The recommendations carry the stamp of the Committee on Environmental Policy and, thus, the UNECE.

EPRs always include a review of waste management problems. They also cover systematically the problems arising from the integration of environmental concerns into sectoral development in selected industries. The selection of industries almost always includes agriculture, and in the majority of reviews, the subjects of cleaner technologies or of chemical industries in particular have been singled out. While the prevailing situations differ between countries, certain commonalities can be tentatively advanced.

Stocks of obsolete pesticides (also fertilisers in some cases) exist in the majority of the transition countries. Their existence is not limited to countries, where large-scale privatisation has occurred, breaking the previous kolkhozes and sovkhoses up into tiny agricultural holdings. The stocks of such agrochemicals may be kept in locked or fenced places, but are, also in such circumstances, otherwise stored without particular care. They may be unattended for long periods of time, and their current chemical status is not always known. Ownership and liability questions are not always solved, as any environmental concern is basically considered as a luxury, and regulations regarding the liability for past environmental damage often are merely seen as an impediment to economic development. Reliable information about the extent of the problem is scarce.

Another problem with obsolete chemicals encountered in the EPR programme is restricted to countries that were endowed with a sizeable chemical industry during socialist times. In these countries, the beginning of transition and its associated economic depression often led to the abandonment of chemical establishments. This process sometimes was reinforced by war acts, so that still today, industrial establishments exist, in which chemical products remain unattended since many years. It can be expected that this problem will not find a 'natural' remedy through resumption of economic activities, because it is probably almost always more economical to build a new factory than to sanitise one that was inherited from the past - even when the new owner continues the same business.

A third problem in this general area concerns the existence of stocks of obsolete pharmaceuticals. These stocks exist foremost in countries that had experienced war conflicts during the last decade. Sometimes, these pharmaceuticals had already been outdated at the time of their import - a circumstance that creates particular psychological hindrances for the swift solution of the problem, even where treatment facilities exist.

The EPR recommendations related to these three problem areas are usually limited to conducting inventories of the substances including their chemical identification, in order to determine the size of the problem before proceeding with its solution. At the present time, the ongoing economic depression in the countries concerned often makes even such minimum recommendations unrealistic - if no assistance is forthcoming from outside the country.

### **The Task Force on the pilot project on soil decontamination**

The Task Force was created in 1993, for the purpose of demonstrating to the transition world decontamination of chemically polluted soil. Guided by the Task Force, the UNECE collected information on relevant sites from transition countries. The information pertains to both chemical characteristics of the site and related management aspects. Information was obtained on between 40 and 50 sites. Cooperation with industry is solicited for the actual decontamination process. The actual implementation of soil decontamination on the selected sites suffers from lack of available funds, as well as from organisational problems that are not untypical of transition.

The project included the compilation of a "Compendium of Soil Clean-up Technologies and Soil Remediation Companies". The first issue of the compendium was published in 1997, the second in 2000, in cooperation between the UNECE and the International Centre for Science and High Technology of the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO). Future extensions of the coverage of the compendium or the restructuring of its current contents are under consideration - as is the future shape of and responsibility for the entire pilot project.