

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN POPs ELIMINATION PROGRAMS IN NEPAL

Ram Charitra Sah, Executive Director, CEPHED

Pesticide includes all chemical agents used to kill animal and vegetative life which interferes with agricultural productivity; thus insecticides, herbicides, fungicides, and rodenticides are special types of pesticide, regardless of their mode of action. Of these compounds, synthetic organic chemicals are the most important, in terms of growth rate as well as consumption, and potential for contaminating the environment. Pesticides residues are absorbed by lichens from the environment and through them reach higher animals and eventually, human beings. Similarly, pesticide residues in water, diatoms and planktons reach higher animals through the consumption of aquatic flora and fauna. Pesticides often trans-locate from soil and food crops. The sale of pesticides should be strictly regulated under state laws that require products to be registered and all label directions approved. No new pesticides may be registered without positive evidence of its safety to people, crops, domestic animals, wildlife, and the environment generally.

The environmental problems associated with the extensive use of persistent organic pesticide have been appreciated for many years but the mismanagement and badly storage of date expired obsolete pesticides have resulted unprecedented environmental damages in various part of the world. The toxicity and environmental problems associated with the commercial use of other haloorganics that get accidentally as well as unintentionally released into the environment has only recently been appreciated.

Half a million tons of expired, spoiled, prohibited and unwanted obsolete pesticides are in storage world-wide according to estimates by UN international Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The pesticides are inadequately stored: in leaking containers, torn packages, burst gas-toxic waste of the worst kind. This waste containers the environment, destroys livestock, poisons valuable drinking water and soil and transforms foodstuff into hazardous health dangers. The similar storage conditions have been found with 74.2 metric tones obsolete pesticides, majority of which are banned are stored in 24 locations/warehouses throughout the Nepal.

Ten large transnational chemical manufacturers – who control over eighty percent of the world market, are largely responsible for the production and export of the toxins. The products of pesticides companies such as Sumitomo- Japan, Shell- Netherlands, Sandoz, Ciba Geigy (both now Novartis)- Switzerland, Union Carbide(Dow), Cynamid, Du Pont, Monsanto- USA, Bayer AG, Hoechst, Degesch, Urania-Spiess, Linde- Germany and Rhone Poulenc (now Bayer)- France are found in the various part of the country threaten to public health and environment.

Similarly in Nepal, there are other different sources of POPs than pesticides. Out of 74 tones of obsolete pesticides, about one third is being classified as POPs. The unprecedented open burning of the solid waste including medical waste as well as use of incinerators in health care institutions, traditional industrial practices e.g. chlorine base bleaching, frequent forest fires as well as heavy biomass based household energy system are the identified sources of the unintentional POPs. Latest estimates of Dioxin and Furan based on standard tool kits, annual production of Dioxin and Furan from a small unindustrialized least developing country like Nepal is about 312.55 gTEQ, which is very high.

Like wise, thousands of liters of PCB contaminated oils have been found to be stored unsafely in various part of the country. The major sources of these contaminated oils are the old model transformers. However there are other various sources of PCB contamination not being considered in the latest inventory. According to the latest estimation, there is about 107585.3 liter

of oil contaminated with PCBs. Out of which about 92,023 liter of oils contains PCBs more than 50 ppm and remaining 15562.3 liters contains less than 50 ppm.

Pesticide and POPs effects on human health include acute poisoning, cancer, birth defects, and effects to immune system, digestive system, and reproductive system etc. The WHO estimates that some 1 million people suffer acute pesticide poisoning and at least 20,000 die each year. At least two-thirds of this illness and death results from occupational exposures in developing countries where people use pesticides without proper warnings or protective gears. The effects of pesticides and POPs on other ecological ecosystems especially aquatic life, wild life have been found serious and disturbed the depending food chains.

To minimize the impact of pesticides and POPs, government has adopted various cultural practices, biological practices, use of resistant varieties, chemical control with least toxic substances, legal controls, promoting IPM etc to address the issue of pesticides which are being currently used. Moreover promotion of IPM and bio-pesticides is getting higher priorities. Where as to address the obsolete pesticide problems, government have initiated strategies to make complete liable to the importing, sales and distributing agencies as well as manufacturing agencies by making appropriate amendment of more than a decade old pesticide acts and regulations. There is a need of balancing importation of pesticides with the farmers' demands and complying with all the existing environment as well as pesticides related laws and standards. However, there is still not much success being made to address the pesticides problems and thus problems is on rises. This is also due to the lack of adequate resources (human resources, finance and technologies) with government and lack of effective implementation of the existing laws and regulations.

The recent inventory carried out under POPs Enabling Activities Project a joint undertake by POPs convention focal point Ministry of Environment, Science and Technology (MOEST) and UNIDO is heading towards finding out appropriate solution and environmentally friendly disposal options of obsolete pesticides and at the same time, it is intended to address the issued of other POPs like Dioxin, Furan, PCBs etc. The progress of the project is relatively slow due to various political as well as coordination issues among the governmental organization and other stakeholders. The ongoing projects have taken initiative to engage civil society in most of the activities and thus there is hope to go ahead towards finding sustainable better solution to ever unsolved problem of pesticides as POPs.

Civil society is panoply of organization and individuals that engage in public life. Those acting from a social justice perspective engage in public life to help people, groups and governing institutions meet their mutual responsibilities to the society; to check and balance the power of the state and market; and to work towards making real a vision of a just, decent society.

The engagement of civil society is having a long back history in Nepal towards addressing this pesticides and POPs issue. The engagement of civil society in these issues is almost from the time of recognizing the pesticide related problems in Nepal. There is continuous involvement of civil society groups' especially environmental journalist in finding miss management of pesticides (prepared for burning into cement kilns without having any air pollution control devices) and highlighting problem through mass media and made aware about the environmental threat of the same. Then after, civil society has been continuously engaged with the study, research, advocacy and litigation towards addressing the pesticides problems. For example spreading message about the public health and environment threat through the mass media (paper and electronics) as well as advocating lobby against importation of highly toxic pesticides DDT were initiated first time by civil society groups. As continuation of the civil society engagement, recently (November 2005), a public interest litigation has been launched in the Supremes Court of Nepal by a Civil

Society group called PRO PUBLIC along with the affected parties against the concerned government to collect, re-contain, and environmentally manage the decade long obsolete pesticides problem in Nepal. The writer is also a party to that case is under subjudice. The group also continuously advocating for promotion of non burning technology for medical waste management over incineration and able to stop operating municipal incinerator, know source of POPs.

Not only that, the engagement of civil society has not limited with watchdog role playing, it has extended up to the participation in the national level program, joined had with government for making inventory as well as NIP process to address the POPs issue which is underway. Civil society groups also carrying out awareness program through organizing several workshop, seminar and capacity building training. Making available the reference materials both in visual such as documentary as well as printed document such as workshop proceeding, posters, briefing papers etc. in local language to all concerned local people to the policy makers. The civil society groups also engaged in organizing interaction, dialogue as well as putting pressure to the concerned government to respond this problem of pesticides and POPs. We four NGOs Center for Public Health and Environmental Development (CEPHED), Forum for Justice (FFJ), Society for Human Rights, Environment, Law and Governance Activities (SHELGA), Nepal Forum for Environmental Journalist (NEFEJ) are the four IPEN members currently engaged in the POPs elimination related activities in Nepal. The CEPHED organization to which I lead is being exclusively completed the IEC material (Posters entitled STOP INCINERATION) production and launching through organizing interaction program, completed day long awareness and capacity building training program for NGOs on Pesticide and POPs management, and currently being carried out the bio-medical waste management hot spot study.

With these programs, a very rich experience and lessons are being learned such as working collaborating among the civil society as well as in collaboration with the stakeholders especially with the concerned governmental agencies is being found the effective, efficient, economic as well as sustainable way to address the POPs elimination problem. For example the recent capacity building training program were organized by three IPEN member organizations (CEPHED, FFJ and SHELGA) becomes an example and model of working together to address the POPs issue. Other poster launching program in collaboration with the municipalities (local governing bodies) at Butwal municipalities with active participation from health care institutions were proved as the effective and better approach to reach up to the grass root level and bring into the prompt action to realize the need to promote environment friendly alternative non-burning technology for medical waste management over the pollution prone incineration technology. This will directly reduce the POPs release to the environment.

To do all these fabulous work, there is array of challenges civil society has been facing day by day. There is a need to recognize the civil society role as the complementary to the government role towards find safe solution. The lacks of financial as well as technical know how with the civil society is the chronic shortcoming and need to be upgraded by all higher concerned authorities and international communities including government and donor consortium. Despite of all these constraints, civil society engagement in the POPs elimination related activities is increasing and hence need to be recognized as well as institutionalized to result even better public health protection and environment conservation.

Conclusively, the awareness raising, increasing access to information on pesticides and POPs, playing role of watchdog, pressure buildup on government, research, advocacy, litigations, as well as collaboration with government and other stakeholders towards solving the pesticide and POPs related problem and eliminating POPs, its sources etc. are the achievement made so far by

the civil society engagement with this issues are worthy to be share in this workshop and potential to be replicate in other countries.

Ram Charitra Sah
Executive Director
CEPHED
House No 240, Prayagmarg, Minbhawan
Kathmandu, Nepal
Tel/Fax: 977-1-4461508
Email: cephed04@yahoo.com
ramcharitra1@yahoo.com