

## **The Experience and Capacity of Belarusian Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations in Solving Problems Related to Unsustainable Chemicals Management**

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Among the major environmental threats we face today in Belarus one of the most dangerous is the increasing pollution by chemicals. Unfortunately chemicals are not among the top priorities for the Belarusian environmental authorities or environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This case study is based on the experience and lessons learned during the 5 years of campaigning against persistent organic pollutants (POPs) in Belarus. POPs problem served as a first serious challenge for Belarusian NGOs in the sphere of chemical safety. The results of this work could serve as a background for effective participation of NGOs in the forthcoming SAICM implementation.

The POPs problem has been highlighted in Belarusian society approximately 8-10 years ago after being raised by scientists and then environmental NGOs who realized, or at least assumed, that POPs represent a serious danger for the population and the environment of Belarus. Governmental bodies paid heed to the POPs issue only after a series of scandals in Europe with the discovery of high levels of dioxins in food products, especially chicken.

One reason for such a passive attitude to the POPs problem in Belarus springs from the Soviet period, when chemical pollution issue was controlled by special services (KGB) and nobody outside of that organisation was made aware that such problems existed. Another obstacle of the end-of-90s period was the lack of experience faced by Belarusian NGOs. During USSR civil society organizations and their activity were prohibited. Practically all the NGOs in Belarus have been established during the last 10-15 years. Consequently they have little experience of public work, in contrast to their foreign colleagues. It has also been noted that the authority's attitude to NGOs is far from ideal, which is the reason why the majority of Belarusian environmental NGOs prefer to focus on very general issues, like environmental education or sustainable development thus avoiding working on environmental problems that may lead to a conflict with the authorities.

Environmental group FRI started an active campaign on POPs approximately 5 years ago. Undoubtedly, we saw this campaign as a challenge opportunity for the NGOs in Belarus to play a crucial role in helping to solve the POPs problem. It was a firm confidence that the initiative for co-operation between NGOs and authorities on the joining of the Stockholm Convention should come from public sector. However, we also believed the successful implementation of the Stockholm Convention is possible only with the real co-operation between the different sectors. First years of the campaign have been devoted to producing and dissemination first independent information about POPs problem in Belarus, and establishing co-operation with national authorities, especially Ministry of the Environment of Belarus, and foreign environmental NGOs and coalitions, working with the POPs issue. Such organizations like IPEN, GAIA, Arnika played a crucial role in providing necessary information and assistance for Belarusian NGOs, resulted in substantially-increased capacity and ability of those NGOs to influence on decision-making process on POPs issue in Belarus.

In 2003 FRI started to publish independent environmental magazine *Dirty Dozen* which is focused on chemical safety and POPs problems. This magazine served as a tool for

dissemination of independent information on chemical safety problems among various stakeholders.

The key-activity of the campaign was the preparation and conduction of the first National Conference “Persistent Organic Pollutants in the Environment of Belarus”. This was organized by Ecoproject and FRI in co-operation with Ministry of the Environment and the World Bank in January 31, 2003.

The conference became an initial meeting point on POPs issue for many environmental NGOs, scientists, officials from different government institutions, Parliament, UNIDO, World Bank, and mass media. The work of the conference resulted in creation of the Petition to the President of Belarus and other authorities with the request to accept the Stockholm Convention. This petition was signed by a number of environmental NGOs and representatives from Academy of Science, Parliament and other official institutions. The event was widely covered by Belarusian mass media. Holding of the conference and creation of the petition directly influenced on the process of accession of Belarus to Stockholm Convention - Belarus accessed to Stockholm Convention in December 2003 with the signing of the Decree by the President of the Republic of Belarus.

So, Belarus had become a real part of the Stockholm Convention. Significant contribution to make this event happened was made by non-governmental environmental organizations from Belarus and abroad. Thus, it became the good case when the environmental NGOs of Belarus were able to make a direct influence on policy change.

Given this contribution it is considered by many working in the field of POPs throughout Europe and beyond as unjust that representatives of environmental NGOs were not included into the coordination council on implementation of the convention. Thus, NGOs have only the slight possibility to influence on the process by making recommendations for further dissemination among council members in non-official way.

After accession to the Stockholm Convention, FRI and several other NGOs, like Ecosphere, and Belarusian division of International Academy of Ecology continued their campaign. Among activities which have been implemented, it is necessary to mention POPs analyses in free-range chicken eggs near the Trostenec dumpsite, which showed quite high level of contamination. A number of reports on POPs situation in Belarus and in a several hot-spots were also produced and disseminated by FRI. After start of the GEF project on preparation of NIP on Stockholm Convention in Belarus, NGOs started to play an active role in this project by providing public expertise, and organizing awareness-raising.

But the POPs problem is just a problem which relates to 12 chemicals. And a problem of sustainable management of chemicals is much broader and complicated. But participation in solving of the POPs problem provides a unique experience for successful participation of Belarusian NGOs in the SAICM implementation.

Here is a brief description of the experience and capacity of Belarusian NGOs related to activity on chemicals management.

There are a number of different non-governmental organizations and groups in Belarus and about 100 of them work on environmental issues. 5-6 years ago there were practically no NGOs working on POPs or chemicals issues, but now there are several. These are notably: environmental group FRI, Ecosphere, Ecoproject, Belarusian division of International Academy of Ecology, Nerush, Endo, and Krynica. So, we see that more and more NGOs are starting to pay attention to chemicals pollution problem.

Generally, the current level of awareness among NGOs on chemicals issues has to be described as inadequate. The reason for this is the absence of motivated activists actively involved in dealing with this issue. Before accession of Belarus to Stockholm Convention, environmental NGOs, (and especially local groups) didn't have an effective tool for co-operation with the authorities in the field of chemicals. The implementation of Stockholm Convention provides such a tool and it is envisaged more NGOs will be involved in POPs and other chemicals problems they pose in Belarus.

The majority of NGOs simply don't have the resources or the man-power / capacity to work on chemicals issues. Another problem is that a lot of environmental activists lack motivation on what they see as a complex "scientific" issue. So, before there can be a real involvement of NGOs into the process of SAICM implementation, it's absolutely necessary to organize an educational campaign for environmental activists, especially for the members of local environmental groups. From our point of view, we see this as an opportunity for the NGOs in Belarus to play an important role in helping to solve the chemicals problem at a local level. Local knowledge is vital. Local groups are often more aware of the local situation and are in the unique position to be able to provide the authorities with information and disseminate information about dangerous chemicals among the local population, an activity the local authorities don't normally organize, especially in regions.

It is much easier for a NGO to organize a fruitful co-operation with local and regional authorities than to attempt doing it at national level and it is possible that some local environmental NGOs already have good relations with their local environmental authorities and local officials. These people are often ready for a good working collaboration with local NGOs.

As a conclusion, we can state that, despite of the numerous problems and lack of capacity, Belarusian environmental NGOs have the ability to influence at the local level on the implementation process of SAICM, especially in "hot spot" regions.

NGOs can control the implementation of the scheme in their regions; they can propose some concrete activities to be implemented at a local level.