

The Stockholm High-Level Dialogue on Sound Management of Chemicals and Waste beyond 2020, on 12 March 2018:

How to make an ambitious new chemicals and waste global framework



Upon invitation from the Swedish Environment Minister Karolina Skog, on 12 March a group of high-level officials from governments, Inter-governmental Organizations, civil society organizations and industry met for a discussion on how to promote an ambitious framework on sound management of chemicals and waste. The aim of the dialogue was to raise commitment and engagement on this crucial issue. The main questions addressed were related to the essential elements to be included in the framework and how to ensure that a successful and ambitious decision will be taken in 2020, that strengthens both the protection of human health and the environment and advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Context

The current SAICM (Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management) and the Dubai Declaration on International Chemicals Management clearly state that sound management of chemicals is essential for sustainable development. There are wide differences today in the capacity of the world's countries to manage chemicals and waste. In many countries, preventive chemicals control or waste management is currently non-existent or weakly developed. SAICM aims to improve chemical management in all countries, including closing gaps between developed and developing countries regarding chemicals and waste management.

Pollution is the largest environmental cause of disease and premature death in the world today. pollution were responsible for an estimated 9 million premature deaths in 2015. That is 16% of all deaths worldwide, according to the Lancet Commission on pollution and health 2017.¹

The production and use of chemicals throughout the world is increasing and is expected to continue to do so. Many chemicals in circulation have highly hazardous properties. The world's leaders have already taken steps to prevent dispersion of chemicals and waste. The use and release of persistent organic compounds have been limited especially by the Stockholm Convention. The spread of mercury has been limited by the Minamata convention. Other substances of global concern are not managed in the same manner despite that they are spreading worldwide. The "Beyond 2020" process offers a unique opportunity to strengthen the sound management of chemicals and waste and promote sustainable development and Agenda 2030.

The dialogue

The participants engaged actively in the discussion and shared their knowledge and experience from different perspectives. The dialogue included discussions on the following aspects:

Health and safety

- Chemicals and waste threaten human health and the environment and there is an urgency to act. Ambition, action and accountability are needed. Everyone should feel safe about the products we buy and use, the food we eat and the environment we live in.
- Information on chemicals in products is key for both producers and consumers. To achieve a circular economy access to information throughout the life cycle is needed, and consumers need information to make informed choices.
- The cost of inaction is significant and the benefit of action is even bigger. Many lives can be saved by investing in the sound management chemicals and waste.

Leadership and cooperation

- We need a bottom-up approach and strong leadership, not only political, also from industry and the investment sector, togetherness with a holistic view. Cooperation is needed and broader involvement of stakeholders, for example from the manufacturing industry, downstream users, the waste sector and civil society, including the youth.
- A deal on chemicals and waste such as the Paris agreement was discussed.
- The new framework has to be endorsed at highest level (High Level Political Forum or UN General Assembly) for the ownership and visibility.
- Unanimous support for further engagement in a collaborative community.
- No country, nor any single sector, can manage the global challenges for sound management chemicals and waste on their own. Capacity building and financing is needed.
- Stronger commitments are needed, but there are various views on the way forward, e.g. national actions plans, guidelines, standards, legally binding elements, voluntary elements were discussed.
- Industry has an important role and advantages of taking action beyond legislation was raised.
- Science and innovation need to be strengthened.

¹ The Lancet Commission on pollution and health 2017.

Sustainable development

- The need to visualize that action on chemicals and waste is a necessity to achieve sustainable development. The way the world chose to manage chemicals and waste influence essential areas of sustainable development such as poverty eradication, human rights, health, climate, water and agriculture.
- Human rights treaties are already in place that can be used, i.e. the rights of the child.
- Substitution of chemicals through competence building among producers is important.
- One challenge is how to adapt to increased trade, including illegal trade and changing trade patterns.

Communication

- We need to communicate the message around chemicals and waste outside the chemicals and waste area in a clear and easy way. One suggestion mentioned was to address the issue at the World Economic Forum in Davos.
- We need an overarching vision that in a simple way conveys the message of sound management of chemicals and waste. We need to put a 'human face' to sound management of chemicals and waste to make the political leadership connect to the topic and to enhance its political importance.

Photo: Ninni Andersson, Government Offices of Sweden