

Stakeholder views on SAICM beyond 2020: Results from an interview series

How should the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) develop beyond 2020? This was the guiding question in a series of nearly 40 interviews with governmental and non-governmental stakeholders from developed and developing countries. The interviews focused on stakeholders' perception on the strengths and weaknesses of the Strategic Approach and on options for enhancing SAICM beyond 2020.

The results show almost universal approval of the voluntary, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral nature of SAICM. They highlight the need for further efforts to enhance implementation of the Strategic Approach, to increase participation of key sectors and stakeholders, and to prioritise action. There was widespread approval for a renewed overarching vision and a set of goals to achieve it, supplemented by suitable indicators to enable more stringent follow-up and review. The general need for an enhanced science-policy interface was widely acknowledged, but no clear model on how it should be designed became visible. More diverging views were held on financing. The results suggest a clear demand for enhancing SAICM based on its current strengths, and they reveal considerable room to manoeuvre through the intersessional process on SAICM beyond 2020.

The reform process for global chemicals and waste governance beyond 2020

Synthetic chemicals are a major contributor to economic development and human well-being. They provide innumerable services and enable the manufacturing and use of a broad range of products. They offer significant benefits to society, and are thus an essential precondition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, their use often has significant consequences for human health and the environment, and therefore it is pivotal to manage them sustainably.

The sound management of chemicals and waste (SMCW) requires the participation of all stakeholders and the involvement of various sectors from the local to the global level, from

chemical producers to downstream users like textile, car or toy manufacturers as well as consumers. At the fourth session of the International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM4) in 2015, delegates launched an intersessional process through resolution IV/4. This process ought to provide recommendations on the future framework for the sound management of chemicals and waste beyond 2020, including SAICM, and should prepare a decision at ICCM5 in 2020.

To support the discussion, adelphi conducted a series of expert interviews, and the results are reported in this policy paper. In total 38 interviews took place with 13 representatives from governments in developed and developing countries, 10 from intergovernmental organisations, nine from civil society organisations

(CSOs), and three each from academia and the private sector.

The interviews were semi-structured and covered the perceived strengths and weaknesses of SAICM, addressed specific details including multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral involvement, the emerging policy issues as well as financing. They also asked for both comments on existing proposals and new ideas to reform SAICM beyond 2020. The answers of all interviewees are reflected here anonymously and only the general affiliation of sources is revealed.

Strong support for a multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach

A clear result of the interviews was that the most important strength of SAICM is its multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral form. There was no interviewee who did not mention these characteristics as defining and essential to the Strategic Approach, and most noted that both should be extended and strengthened beyond 2020. As SMCW is a multi-dimensional challenge, all interviewees agreed that each stakeholder has a vital role to play and must have an opportunity to be involved in deliberations and decision-making. There was widespread approval of the role of SAICM in this regard, and the opportunity to have an open discussion e.g. at ICCM sessions was often mentioned as a key feature.

There was more critical appraisal of the level of engagement of some stakeholders within SAICM, and what role they play both within and outside its framework. Many interviewees noted that SAICM is too heavily rooted in the environment sector, and accordingly they welcomed the recent enhanced engagement of the health sector through the World Health Assembly Resolution 69.4 from May 2016. Most found that SAICM should strive to likewise strengthen its links with the labour and agriculture sector. The most promising strategy for this was considered preparing comparable resolutions at the FAO Council

and the International Labor Conference, respectively. Stakeholders were aware that it takes a “champion”; someone exerting a leadership role like Canada has done towards the health sector. On the labour sector, interviewees with long-standing experience in SAICM were puzzled by its diminished role. Representatives from this sector tended to explain this with a lack of capacities.

A majority of representatives from governments and some officials from international organisations noted that industry could be playing a more proactive role. They noted that chemical producers are engaged in the process through their associations, but wondered how downstream users of chemicals could become more integrated. Business representatives, on the other hand, argued they were highly engaged not only at the ICCM and in the boards of a number of programs and partnerships, but also in other forms e.g. through ICCA’s capacity development workshops. The difference in perceptions could be at least partially due to the focus on different venues. It seemed that many interviewees focusing on the ICCM were not fully aware of the work done under the emerging policy issues (EPs), whereas sources more engaged e.g. in the Chemicals in Products (CiP) programme did not always find compelling reasons to attend the ICCM sessions, and were in turn less aware of developments there.

One idea that emerged during the interviews was that the ICCM could facilitate a series of side events or a thematic day, with sessions focusing on the life cycle of chemicals within various product groups (e.g. toys or textiles, cars or buildings). That way, chemical producers, manufacturers and the retail sector could be brought together to work more closely with each other on the reduction, replacement, or elimination of harmful chemicals. Business representatives especially noted that the ICCM could become a much livelier event, where the policy discussions are one of several thematic streams while others deal with innovation

and technology or discuss partnerships and cross-sectoral collaboration.

Almost universal approval for a voluntary approach

Curiously, the voluntary nature of SAICM was mentioned by many as both a strength and weakness. Almost all interviewees agreed that the voluntary nature of SAICM was one of its key defining characteristics, and that it should be kept beyond 2020. Most importantly, the voluntary framework enabled open discussions and exchange among all stakeholders, invited joint solution seeking, and enabled the establishment of work programmes that might otherwise not have been possible.

Most interviewees realised there is a trade-off between having a more binding instrument that enables stakeholders to take substantive action, and continuous reliance on a voluntary mechanism allowing for more open discussions as well as the flexibility to more easily engage in further issue areas. The developments in the BRS Conventions were seen as a tale of caution: It was assumed that if action on EPIs would become mandatory, one would likely see less willingness to embark on new avenues, to pass resolutions and establish programmes on ongoing and emerging challenges.

Very few stakeholders from both governments and non-governmental sectors said they were in favour of assessing the possibility for a framework convention on chemicals and waste or another form of legally binding agreement. They mentioned the higher level of commitment, the easier provision of or access to financial resources, and the increased visibility in the international arena as advantages. However, they noted there was clearly no majority for actively pursuing this idea, at least not before 2030. Therefore, improving SAICM under its present non-binding form was universally seen as the most realistic path.

Apart from the question of the legal status, a recurrent theme was how to enhance stakeholder commitment towards resolutions taken at the ICCM. Repeated mentions were made of

the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs, which created a high degree of commitment due to the inclusive deliberation process and high-level engagement from all stakeholders. Translating these ideas for SAICM beyond 2020 would mean to build on and probably even extend the nature of non-governmental stakeholder involvement. A small number of interviewees, for example, suggested giving voting rights or some other form of more substantial ownership than they currently have, as e.g. the International Labour Conference does.

Shifting focus, but how?

With the voluntary nature of SAICM and its function as an overarching, multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral forum established as clear cornerstones, the question arises how the Strategic Approach might be enhanced beyond 2020. The interviews were semi-structured, and so they allowed both asking for an opinion on existing reform proposals as well as giving space to lay out additional ideas.

Quite a large number of interviewees were puzzled by the fact that SMCW receives relatively little public attention, at least compared to much more prominent sustainability issues like climate change and biodiversity loss or epidemics like Zika. They perceived this as a mismatch between the economic, social, and environmental relevance of chemicals and wastes and their perceived prominence. No clear strategy emerged from the interviews on how to deal with this. Many pointed towards better communication about the costs and benefits of SMCW. Others were more critical of the way the international community has dealt with chemicals and waste, in particular through SAICM, and said that its relevance and importance would only begin to increase when it becomes more relevant by addressing different issues, or by addressing issues differently.

Some interviewees from both developed and developing countries or working in international organisations suggested a shift in the primary focus of SAICM, so that it

concentrates more strongly on enhancing capacities in developing countries. They noted that within too many countries, basic ingredients of chemical safety management systems were lacking. The BRS conventions as well as SAICM would largely miss this most important foundation. SAICM would be ideally positioned to facilitate such cooperation and provide support, though they noted it would require a reallocation and probably extension of funds. Others added that with the Inter-Organization Programme for the Sound Management of Chemicals (IOMC) toolbox and other instruments e.g. by OECD, useful capacity development mechanisms were already in place and could be built upon. Notably, no one said that SAICM would currently deliver capacity development on a sufficient scale, yet other interviewees were more cautious in saying whether SAICM could or should reorient itself in this way.

How to deal with waste is a contentious issue. The interviews revealed mixed positions of professionals from all backgrounds. Some argued that the focus on hazardous waste was too narrow and limited SAICM unnecessarily, yet more interviewees (especially governmental representatives) argued in favour of it. They said the problems with SAICM were not due to a limited mandate, and tinkering with it would not do much good. Those in doubt noted that hazardous wastes were already dealt with by the Basel Convention, and to fill in gaps SAICM should cover other or even all wastes. One argument was that if SAICM is supposed to approach SMCW from a life-cycle perspective, it has to look more closely at the waste stage of chemicals and chemical products, which includes non-hazardous ones such as plastic. In that regard, some academic and CSO representatives wondered why SAICM has not been much more active on high-impact and highly visible issues like air pollution, heavy metals like cadmium and non-paint uses of lead, or plastic waste. International organisation officials, however, were wary of ideas to broaden the work of SAICM so

massively and pointed to the various mandates of existing institutions, whose work on these issues should not be duplicated.

A small number of interviewees from various backgrounds were unhappy with the name of the Strategic Approach. They said it was neither self-explanatory, nor fully adequate and hard to communicate. There were, however, no proposals for a new name, and several sources cautioned against changing an established designation. Comparable comments were made with regards to the “sound management of chemicals and waste”, with likewise a small number of interviewees especially from civil society, academia and businesses arguing that a switch to “sustainable” management might make more sense. However, governmental sources especially cautioned that changing such long-standing wording can be quite difficult, and that there was no urgent need to do so.

A renewed vision, goals and targets, and follow-up and review mechanism

All interviewees agreed that a clear and renewed vision was needed to spur progress beyond 2020. Achieving SMCW in all countries and across their life-cycle was mentioned, in various forms and wordings, by all interviewees as the essence of that vision. Another element repeatedly mentioned by developed country, business and CSO representatives was a transformative vision involving sustainable chemistry, framed as a dynamic process with the goal to reduce resource consumption of chemicals production, use more benign processes and create safer chemicals, and to find green and socially beneficial solutions for dealing with wastes.

To achieve this vision, a set of actionable goals was considered necessary or at least viable by all sources for a framework beyond 2020, with no interviewee arguing against it. Common points of reference were the SDGs and the Aichi Targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). There was widespread agreement that a more concise list of something between 10 to 20 strategically chosen goals with according indicators would be highly beneficial to foster SMCW. Building on

that, an enhanced system for follow-up and review was repeatedly mentioned, with interviewees from various backgrounds who were aware of the long list of 299 goals and activities in the Global Plan of Action saying the indicators discussed at present do not actually track real-world progress on chemical safety. An often mentioned reference system was the 2030 Agenda, with its commit-and-review approach building on national implementation plans and voluntary country reviews at the annual High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Building on that, some interviewees from academia and international organisations as well as from governments suggested turning the reporting system into a mechanism for mutual learning. They noted that the reports need to be actively used by the international system and at ICCM sessions, that they should be seen – and designed – as an opportunity to report on successful progress as well as on challenges. In that regard, it was suggested to include non-governmental stakeholders in the review mechanism, for example by involving data collected by CSOs or by the chemicals industry under its Responsible Care initiative.

Ongoing and emerging challenges

On the EPIs, many interviewees stated that one of the strengths of SAICM is to work as a tool for addressing ongoing yet hitherto un-addressed as well as upcoming and new challenges. Especially in comparison to the BRS conventions, they saw it as a huge advantage to agree on such issues without the tough negotiations that made it difficult for the conventions to list additional substances over the past years. Representatives from all stakeholder groups noted that listing an issue as an EPI increased its relevance and visibility, though many noted ongoing challenges in implementing them.

A number of interviewees from governments, business, and academia critically mentioned

the composition of the list of issues, stating that it apparently lacked strategic consideration in terms of prioritizing the most urgent or most harmful problems. However, opinions were split over this, and especially CSO representatives noted the list could indeed be different but pointed out that it was the result of a transparent multi-stakeholder driven process, and should be taken (and kept) as such.

Other sources were more critical of the process by which EPIs are established, even though the procedure for nominating new issues is laid out in the annex to resolution II/4 from 2009. Civil society representatives and government officials from developing countries argued that only those issues would have a chance of becoming listed and then implemented which had one or more champions among major donors. The resulting list was therefore considered by many to not mirror the most urgent global chemical safety problems, but rather those for which sufficient support could be mastered among the developed countries. Asked how to resolve this, developing country and CSO representatives answered that a fund should be established which allowed countries to pursue priority activities beyond the EPIs, including the development of basic capacities.

The growing list of EPIs and other issues of concern was seen especially problematic as many sources noted that adding more and more issues was not a promising strategy for achieving global chemical safety. Some interviewees especially from developing countries felt the agenda of ICCM sessions has already begun to be overburdened. Apart from addressing more forcefully the question whether a new issue would not only be relevant in itself, but also in comparison to other challenges, a few interviewees from developed countries proposed that EPIs should possibly be more time-bound and specific, so that they would not become everlasting activities but have a more focused mandate. Other ideas were to deal

with more specific problems primarily through partnerships, reserving the ICCM plenary to questions of overarching steering, reviewing, and planning.

Stronger financial framework wanted amidst funding challenges

Almost all interviewees noted that the current level of financing SAICM is far from sufficient. One made the somewhat counterintuitive point that SAICM should be considered a highly cost-effective framework judged by its minuscule resources, as it achieves quite a lot with small funding. Especially CSOs and government representatives from developing countries complained about a mismatch of needs and funds. Even many officials from developed nations conceded that funding is not on a level they liked to see, yet brought forward domestic budget constraints and pointed towards the integrated approach with its Special Programme and to the increased chemicals and waste focal area budget within the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

The Quick Start Program (QSP) was a common point of reference. Developing country representatives pointed towards the relatively simple procedure to access funds for small- to medium-scale projects, including efforts to bring together national-level stakeholders. CSO representatives argued that QSP projects could have been established by non-governmental organisations, whereas the Special Program merely allows for their participation, giving them a much weaker role especially when governments were not keen to have civil society on board.

One idea to increase the level of funding was to focus on linkages between SMCW and other issue areas like climate change or biodiversity, health and agriculture, and try to access funds operating in these fields. However, interviewees

familiar with the UN system were cautious about the expected results. They noted it could help provide some funds for some projects, but that it would do little to close the huge gap to other fields relevant for sustainable development.

A new science-policy interface

A number of interviewees with an academic background as well as some governmental and international organisation officials were supportive of enhancing the science-policy interface on SMCW. While many agreed that a panel on hazardous substances and wastes was needed to translate scientific findings into policy-relevant knowledge, they noted it should look quite different than the IPCC and would have to be much leaner in its structure.

When asked about its potential tasks, most noted that for such a panel it would not make much sense to repeatedly assess and discuss the global state of chemicals and waste, but rather to focus on more specific issues and publish shorter state-of-the-art reports on these. Apart from spurring progress within SAICM by providing better knowledge on chemicals-related risks as well highlighting existing uncertainties, some interviewees suggested that such a panel could foster transdisciplinary academic cooperation, enable information exchange and learning across disciplines and regions, and generally enhance the visibility of these issues within academia and the public.

There were also a few cautious voices from CSOs who said the usefulness of such a panel would depend on the composition of experts and authors and the process of how they are nominated, whereas governmental representatives pointed towards the financial implications and the need to think about a lean structure, e.g. by having the ICCM decide on its work programme.

Further information: <http://chemicalsbeyond2020.adelphi.de>

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