

SAICM Plenary session, 1 October 2019. Bangkok, Thailand

Thank you co-chair. And thank you to our hosts and the SAICM Secretariat.

Rory O'Neill, representing the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Over 200 million members, over 300 trade union centres in over 160 countries. I am also a member of the SAICM bureau, representing workers.

I would like to raise some concerns, but hopefully as an incentive for us to make a more accountable, comprehensive, effective new SAICM...

Our friend from Argentina has already quoted the The Global Chemical Outlook II (GCO II) report that informed our April 2019 discussions in Uruguay.

"Business as usual is not an option".

Only it is. - at least as far as SAICM 2.0 is concerned.

SAICM is voluntary, it is optional. This for the union side remains a concern.

We have all recognised the (also voluntary) SAICM 1.0 failed to meet basic goals.

I fear our starting point for SAICM 2.0, was not 'what went wrong'.

But 'how can we do what went wrong better'.

We are working on an assumption that good intentions will lead good things. Good luck with that.

Here's two quick examples this year that give reason for scepticism.

But more positively, it is an argument for making sure any new SAICM agreement is as robust, ambitious and enforceable as possible to overcome [to use a chemical term] inertia.

Making all parties accountable and failures and successes visible.

EXAMPLE 1: INTERNATIONAL CHRYSOTILE ASSOCIATION

There are a number of faces from April's meeting in Uruguay missing here. One is from the International Chrysotile Association, the lobbying arm of the Global Asbestos industry.

The reason ICA is not here is because it doesn't need to be. The Uruguay meeting took place in the days before many of us in this room travelled to the May 2019 Triple COP, where the addition of chrysotile asbestos onto Prior informed Consent List of the Rotterdam Convention would be discussed.

ICA came to see if the SAICM deliberations signalled a threat to defence of asbestos exports. It need not have worried.

Chrysotile, along with Paraquat, despite meeting every single scientific criterion – important for our discussions of the science-policy interface – was not made subject to the extremely modest requirements of PIC listing. Not a ban, just a health warning.

EXAMPLE 2: LONDON METAL EXCHANGE

Here's another example of how even prestigious business organisations may not embrace the SAICM message quite as quickly as many of us would hope.

On 18 September 2019, The London Metal Exchange (LME) – which describes itself as the world centre for industrial metals trading – postponed plans announced in April 2019 'to ban metal tainted by human rights abuses until 2025.'

The Exchange originally announced it would act after media revelations that metals including cobalt were being mined by children in artisanal mines in Africa.

The cobalt used in the phones and laptops we use as we congratulate ourselves for taking part in a paperless meeting. [we save a tree, but we exploit a child].

The child labour mining that cobalt is just a couple of steps down the supply chain from immensely profitable multinationals.

The London Metal Exchange is already half-way to missing any SAICM 2030 deadline we've not even agreed as yet.

BEST POSSIBLE VOLUNTARY

So, if we are to have voluntary, it better be the best possible voluntary, the most accountable voluntary.

This London Metals Exchange example shows why SAICM 2.0 needs ambition and needs financial, political and organisation levers to make that happen.

If any or all of the governments here incidentally want that to include making some or all of SAICM to be legally binding, I'll be taking down names at the end of this session.

If not, let's at least make the content relevant.

HUMAN RIGHTS

That means including strong language on labour protection and human rights.

In this regard we warmly welcome the agreement of the UN Human Rights Council that exposure to industrial toxins is a human rights issue.

We also appreciate greatly the call yesterday from a UN IOMC organisation, the International Labour Organisation, for SAICM 2.0 to be framed in a human rights context.

PROBLEM OF PRECARIOUS WORK

Most new jobs created are insecure jobs.

Artisanal mining is not the freakish fringe of industry. It is business as usual for one of the most profitable business in the world.

We have record numbers in work, but new jobs even in developed nations are frequently low paid and insecure.

This isn't decent work. This is indecent work.

SO, IN THE NEW SAICM WE MUST INCLUDE

Chemical exposures at work start with extraction or harvesting of materials, their manufacture and use, and their disposal. The workplace must be a key SAICM issue.

We need to ensure our ambition includes the ILO's fundamental rights at work – legally binding conventions on the freedom from forced labour, from child labour, and the rights to join, bargain and organise in a trade union.

It must include a commitment to reference and seek ratification of these conventions and of the ILO's key safety conventions, on occupational health and safety, chemicals, carcinogens and key sectors including mining, construction and agriculture.

PRESSURE TO COMPLY

And there must be real pressure to comply.

For unions, that means we will use all the tools in the tool box, negotiations, bipartite and tripartite agreements, collective agreements, framework agreements, environmental and decent labour clauses in World Bank and IFI procurement documents - and where necessary industrial action.

We do all of this already.

But we need a properly resourced SAICM to ensure this happens. The examples given by Health Care Without Harm show how effect the QuickStart programme was in stimulating lasting change.

We need a QuickStart on Steroids.

TASK FOR ALL OF US

For all of us, we can't let the bad actors set the standard, the rogues undercut the reasonable.

That means using disclosures at annual general meetings, using investor relations, using pensions funds, the media to apply pressure.

In means using the holding corporations to already agree international commitments, like the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, the OECD guidelines on Multinational Enterprises (MNES), the ILO fundamental and safety conventions.

SO IF VOLUNTARY....

So, if we are to have voluntary, it better be the best possible voluntary, the most accountable voluntary....

We must say to the polluters and the poisoners 'If you expose us, we'll expose you'.