



Beyond 2020: Raising the political priority of chemical safety

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Introduction

The Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) addresses significant health and environmental harms caused by chemical exposure and makes a global political commitment to reform how chemicals are produced and used in order to minimize those harms. Heads of State at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg called for the development of SAICM. While the agreement is not legally binding, its basic texts represent a consensus of Environment Ministers, Health Ministers and other delegates from more than one hundred governments who attended the first International Conference on Chemicals Management (ICCM1), held in Dubai, February 2006.

Unfortunately, SAICM has a relatively low political priority in most countries. In addition, there also appears to be low to moderate visibility and commitment to sound chemicals management within UN agencies. A recent report by the United Nations Environmental Management Groups notes that, “*While the priority of sound chemicals management as a topic appears relatively high on the agenda of many organizations, visibility of and commitment to it in the UN system is low to moderate.*”¹ In the absence of SAICM, no international framework would exist for addressing the majority of the world’s most pressing chemical safety concerns. However, the SAICM secretariat appears to have a low visibility within the UN system, when it should be its chemical safety flagship.

Some ascribe SAICM’s low political priority in countries to the fact that the agreement is not legally binding. Others note the lack of a tangible, adequate financial mechanism for implementation of the agreement. Another view considers that sound chemicals management needs better messaging to highlight its links to sustainable development. All of these characteristics make it difficult for SAICM to achieve a higher political priority; however, governments widely agree on the need to raise the political priority of chemical safety and that should also include SAICM and arrangements on chemical safety Beyond 2020.

Governments agree on the need to raise the political priority of chemical safety

In 2012 at the Rio+20 summit, governments agreed on the need for, “*heightened efforts to increase the political priority accorded to sound management of chemicals and waste.*”² In 2014, the first United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA1), in its decision on chemicals and wastes, welcomed the report of the Executive Director entitled, “*Strengthening the sound management of chemicals and wastes in the long term.*”³ The report notes that, “*There is a need to increase the political priority and commitment to*

¹ UN Environment Management Group (2015) United Nations and sound chemicals management: Coordinating delivery for Member States and sustainable development,

https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2334chemical_report.pdf

² United Nations (2012) Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 July 2012: 66/288. The Future We Want, Para 223, A/RES/66/288 <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/futurewewant.html>

³ UNEP (2014) Continued strengthening of the sound management of chemicals and waste in the long term, United Nations Environment Assembly, UNEP/EA.1/L.17

the sound management of chemicals and wastes at the local, national, regional and global levels, recognizing that a number of processes present opportunities to draw attention to these important issues, including those relating to the sustainable development goals and the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management.”⁴

As chemical use and production continues to expand, SAICM should be upgraded in importance to match the growing challenge of health, environmental, and economic injuries associated with the production and use of toxic chemicals and wastes. Because of its broad scope and relevance to chemical safety concerns not covered by other agreements, SAICM remains the only global forum where the problems of sound chemicals management can be comprehensively identified and addressed.

SAICM objectives and recommendations for implementation

Chemicals management in countries is spread out among many ministries and institutions, making coherent management a serious challenge. The SAICM agreement clearly acknowledges, “*gaps, overlaps, and duplication in chemicals management activities and there is a need in many countries for enhanced coherence, consistency and cooperation...*”⁵

Governments have agreed within SAICM that chemical safety mechanisms should be multi-sectoral, comprehensive, effective, efficient, transparent, coherent and inclusive, and they should ensure accountability. SAICM also represents a global consensus that chemicals regulation should, “*promote and support meaningful and active participation by all sectors of civil society, particularly women, workers and indigenous communities, in regulatory and other decision-making processes that relate to chemical safety.*”⁶

SAICM’s Overarching Policy Strategy recommends each government designate a SAICM national focal point and establish an inter-ministerial or inter-institutional committee to represent relevant chemical safety areas.⁷ The focal point should be a representative of this inter-ministerial committee. Relevant sectors of government may include, among others, ministries of Environment, Health, Agriculture, Labor, Industry and Development.

SAICM has an extensive list of national focal points and also a series of regional government focal points, and focal points for intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations.⁸ However, it is not clear how many countries have actually successfully established functional inter-ministerial committees, especially considering SAICM’s low political priority.

Chemical units

One way to increase the political priority of SAICM and chemicals management within countries would be to formalize coordination of the inter-ministerial committee recommended in the SAICM agreement. One way to do this would be to utilize a pre-existing structure to assume this responsibility. The Montreal

⁴ UNEP (2014) Continued strengthening of the sound management of chemicals and waste in the long term, United Nations Environment Assembly, UNEP/EA.1/L.17

⁵ UNEP - WHO (2006) Overarching Policy Strategy, para 9, Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=475

⁵ http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=143&Itemid=528

⁶ UNEP - WHO (2006) Overarching Policy Strategy, para 16, Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=475

⁶ http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=143&Itemid=528

⁷ UNEP - WHO (2006) Overarching Policy Strategy, para 23, Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=475

⁸ http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=143&Itemid=528

Protocol supported the development and operation of national ozone units in 147 countries, including a peer support system and regional networks. These units have been generally acknowledged to have played a key role in the successful implementation of the Protocol. These ozone units could be broadened and serve as focal points for implementation of SAICM, and the Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm, and Minamata Conventions.

The idea of expanding the ozone units to serve as chemical units emerged during the consultative process on financing options for chemicals and wastes, launched by the UNEP Executive Director in 2009. It appeared again during discussions of the financing mechanism for the Minamata Convention, which concluded in 2012.

Ideally, the chemical units would locate chemical safety responsibilities in a single effectively-operated institutional arrangement. The updated chemical units could have a multi-disciplinary nature, including a role in coordination, regulation, financing /mainstreaming, compliance, needs assessment, reporting and others. The units should interface with all stakeholders as well as the regional centers established by the Basel and Stockholm Conventions. The efforts to establish synergies in the chemicals conventions have primarily focused on the secretariats. This proposal focuses on synergies at the national level.

Development agencies and chemical safety

In many ways SAICM has been ahead of its time in linking chemical safety and sustainable development. The first statement of SAICM's Dubai Declaration states, "*The sound management of chemicals is essential if we are to achieve sustainable development, including the eradication of poverty and disease, the improvement of human health and the environment and the elevation and maintenance of the standard of living in countries at all levels of development.*"⁹ This ministerial-level recognition led to raised expectations that chemical safety would become a priority of development assistance and that international development assistance agencies would provide substantial funding for SAICM implementation. However, this has not yet occurred on a significant scale. Beyond 2020, development agencies should elevate the priority given to sound chemicals management and incorporate chemical safety into planning and assistance programs. This should be tracked with a clearing house mechanism that measures development aid for sound chemicals management.

> Outcomes for raising the political priority of chemical safety

1. Creation of adequately-funded chemical safety coordination units. This might take the form of broadening the Montreal Protocol units to serve as coordinating multi-disciplinary national operations for implementation of SAICM, and the Basel, Rotterdam, Stockholm, and Minamata Conventions.
2. Development agencies increase the funding priority of chemical safety in development aid.
3. The SAICM secretariat tracks development aid for sound chemicals management with a clearing house mechanism.

⁹ UNEP - WHO (2006) Dubai Declaration, Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=73&Itemid=475