

INC2 Intervention Article 13, January 25, 2011

Lessons Learned from Minamata

By Takeshi Yasuma, Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution (CACP) in Japan

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman,

I am Takeshi Yasuma from Citizens Against Chemicals Pollution (CACP) in Japan, speaking on behalf of the Zero Mercury Working Group and IPEN.

My intervention concerns Article 13: Contaminated Sites.

The Minamata tragedy here in Japan provides important lessons for protecting human health and the environment from mercury pollution at contaminated sites.

I would like to make six main points for addressing mercury-contaminated sites:

- (1) Act on symptoms: In Minamata, clear warning signs were ignored. To prevent future tragedies, abnormal signs or symptoms in the health of residents or in the environment of communities should immediately trigger a thorough investigation to identify what has happened, what is the cause and who is the polluter.
- (2) Identify the source: In Minamata, Chisso was the source of the pollution but denied it for years. To prevent continued release of mercury, the polluter's responsibility for the mercury pollution should be quickly established.
- (3) Investigate health effects: The health impacts of persons living near the contaminated site should be thoroughly investigated, taking into account impacts on vulnerable populations. After 55 years, this has not yet been thoroughly performed in Minamata.
- (4) Implement liability and compensation: As stated in Rio Principle 13, victims of pollution should be properly compensated. Rio Principle 16 clearly states that the polluter should bear the cost of pollution and promote the internalization of costs. Neither of these principles have been fully implemented in Minamata.
- (5) Raise public awareness: The Minamata community received no information or warning about the presence of mercury in fish. This reinforces the need to provide free, accessible information to persons who live around contaminated sites on the presence of mercury and the risks of mercury exposure.
- (6) Clean-up the site in a timely manner: After 55 years, the Minamata site is still contaminated. To learn from this sad situation, the treaty should contain provisions regarding timely remediation of contaminated sites in an environmentally sound manner

To conclude Mr. Chair, the lack of these measures in Minamata caused a painful tragedy that has affected victims' lives for more than fifty years – and still remains unresolved.

I would like to ask the INC to consider incorporating these important lessons learned from Minamata into the Mercury Treaty so that problems connected to mercury-contaminated sites do not occur in the future.

Thank you very much.