



International POPs Elimination Project

*Fostering Active and Efficient Civil Society Participation in
Preparation for Implementation of the Stockholm Convention*

Informing Residents of the Republic of Karakalpakstan (RK) Living Near Disposal Sites of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)

"Women for Sustainable Development"

"The Union for Protection of the Aral Sea and the Amu Daria"

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About the International POPs Elimination Project

On May 1, 2004, the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN <http://www.ipen.org>) began a global NGO project called the International POPs Elimination Project (IPEP) in partnership with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). The Global Environment Facility (GEF) provided core funding for the project.

IPEP has three principal objectives:

- Encourage and enable NGOs in 40 developing and transitional countries to engage in activities that provide concrete and immediate contributions to country efforts in preparing for the implementation of the Stockholm Convention;
- Enhance the skills and knowledge of NGOs to help build their capacity as effective stakeholders in the Convention implementation process;
- Help establish regional and national NGO coordination and capacity in all regions of the world in support of longer term efforts to achieve chemical safety.

IPEP will support preparation of reports on country situation, hotspots, policy briefs, and regional activities. Three principal types of activities will be supported by IPEP: participation in the National Implementation Plan, training and awareness workshops, and public information and awareness campaigns.

For more information, please see <http://www.ipen.org>

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This report is available in the following languages: English, Russian

Informing Residents of the Republic of Karakalpakstan (RK) Living Near Disposal Sites of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)

Abbreviations

RK - the Republic of Karakalpakstan

RU - the Republic of Uzbekistan

POPs - persistent organic pollutants

NNO - a non-governmental non-profit organisation

UPA - the Union for Protection of the Aral Sea and the Amu Daria

SEF - a Sanitary and Epidemiological Facility

Summary

The pilot project of NGO "Women for Sustainable Development" of NNO "The Union for Protection of the Aral Sea and the Amu Daria" - Informing Residents of the Republic of Karakalpakstan (RK), Living Nearby Disposal Sites of Persistent Organic Pollutants - sought to address the problem of lack of information on adverse health and environmental impacts of POPs and low awareness of local residents, living near burial sites for pesticides and other chemicals (including POPs.). The project was implemented in Spring-2006.

Project works were conducted in three districts of RK (Amudariinskiy, Nukuskiy and Kegeiliinskiy). From 1980 to 1995, pesticides were applied in these districts particularly intensively. The target groups of our information dissemination and awareness raising program included rural residents, local self-government bodies, district *khakimiats*, journalists, law enforcement bodies, rural public health specialists, high schoolers and NGOs of these districts.

1. The project implementation report

Introduction

In 2001, partly in response to results of research studies of the international organisation "Medics without Frontiers" on contamination of food products, the WHO, in co-operation with the Government of Uzbekistan, developed a project proposal for the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), stipulating allocation of \$500,000 for pesticide management, health risk assessments and monitoring, public awareness raising, and legislative reforms. However, Uzbekistan would be eligible for GEF funding only after ratification of the Stockholm Convention. So far, the above project is not implemented. POPs-related problems are rather acute in the country, particularly in Karakalpakstan, where pesticides were intensively applied for several decades. It is necessary to launch a large-scale national program urgently in order to raise awareness of local residents, particularly rural residents who live near pesticide burial sites, because now local residents steal and use obsolete pesticides and pesticide packaging without any control.

Objectives of the pilot project:

- to inform residents of three districts, who live nearby disposal sites of pesticides and other chemicals (including POPs), as well as other residents of the country on the adverse health and environmental impacts of POPs;
- to attract attention of mass media outlets to the problem of POPs;
- to require organisations in charge of management of the burial sites to fulfill their functions;
- to develop documentation on the quality of the burial sites in the Republic of Karakalpakstan for the Council of Minister of the RK and the Government of Uzbekistan;
- to develop foundations for further POPs-related activities in the Republic of Karakalpakstan

Relevance of the project

In the period from 1980 to 1995, in terms of pesticides application intensity, Amudariinskiy, Nukuskiy and Kegeiliiskiy districts of the RK were among the leaders. Now, residents of these districts, who live near sites of former pesticides storage facilities, use contaminated soil for production of bricks for housing construction purposes (!). These former storage facilities are affected by rainfall, as a result, pesticides infiltrate into soil and groundwater.

Now, according to different sources, these contaminated sites are of extremely poor technical quality, anybody may access these sites easily, the sites are not guarded and fenced, and there are no warning signs.

Other sources of POPs (dioxins and furans) are mainly represented by burning of household waste (including plastic bottles) and dry leaves.

In the course of the project implementation, we established a working group of representatives of the Republican Sanitary and Epidemiological Facility (SEF), journalists, representatives of NNOs, and the Women's Committee of the Republic of Karakalpakstan.

A) "Round tables"

April 2006, the Republic of Karakalpakstan:

We conducted two meetings in Nukuskiy and Kegeiliiskiy districts, with the participation of public health specialists of rural medical facilities, representatives of district-level sanitary and epidemiological facilities, environmental inspectors of these districts, representatives of local self-government bodies, district-level mass media outlets, district-level women's committees, and deputy directors of colleges (72 persons in total).

There were no surprises - as we expected, POPs-related issues were almost absolutely unknown to residents of these districts. However, nobody knows who is responsible for the lack of relevant information... Notwithstanding that in the Soviet period, defoliants were applied on all cotton fields (there were specialised squadrons of aircraft in rural areas for aerial spraying of defoliants), rural residents are still largely unaware of their adverse health impacts.

Only chief sanitarians of district-level sanitary and epidemiological facilities were seriously concerned about use of contaminated soil from pesticide storage sites for production of bricks for construction purposes. S.Karimova, the chief sanitarian of the Sanitary and Epidemiological Facility of Kegeiliiskiy district, noted that they made serious efforts to inform local residents on hazards, associated with use of contaminated soil, but due to financial difficulties, local residents ignore their warnings and build their houses from "dangerous bricks". A similar situation is observed in Nukuskiy district. S.Isakova (a sanitarian) noted that no purposeful efforts were made in the district to inform local residents about POPs. Local residents burn household waste in their backyards regularly.

In addition to the above pollution sources, there is another one - in Kegeiliiskiy district, at the site of the former rural airstrip, where aerial pesticide spraying aircraft operated earlier, a water source is located. Ignoring warnings of SEFs, local residents use water from the source for drinking and other household purposes. In contemporary economic conditions, it is impossible to assess health impacts of water from the source.

Public health workers made numerous applications to relevant authorities, asking them to fence the source and install warning signs, but in vain. Accounting for results of discussions at the meetings, we decided to submit relevant letters to governmental bodies and publicise the situation in local and republican mass media outlets.

May 2006, the Republic of Karakalpakstan:

In early May, we conducted a roundtable discussion in Amudariinskiy district, with participation of representatives of local self-government bodies, public health workers, representatives of SEFs, the State Committee for Environment and journalists (25 persons in total).

The meeting participants acknowledged the relevance of these issues, particularly in their district, as many local residents encountered adverse effects of aerial spraying of defoliants over cotton fields. According to A.Mustafina (the chief of Sanitary and Hygiene Department of the Republican SEF), "... in Amudariinskiy district, aerial spraying was much more intensive, compared to other districts. In addition to cotton fields, chemicals were sprayed over other land areas and over residential houses. In 1999, hexachlorane was removed from the territory of Amudariinskiy district. Initially, the director and the chief agronomist of a collective farm simply ordered burial of hexachlorane in the ground without any protection measures. Forty truckloads of contaminated soil were removed from the site and buried on a specialised burial site for toxic chemicals. It is unknown, how long these pesticides were in direct contact with ground, and how much of them were washed out by rainfall and infiltrated other areas!" She urged the meeting participants to inform local residents that it is dangerous to construct houses near former pesticide storage facilities and use adjacent territories as cattle grazing grounds.

Unfortunately enough, staff members of sanitary and epidemiological facilities, and local self-government bodies, who are expected to inform local residents on these matters, are themselves very poorly aware on associated hazards and do not realise how dangerous the POPs-related situation in the country is in general and in their districts, in particular.

The meeting participants noted that low awareness of local resident of the hazardous effects of chemical pollutants results in grave consequences. For example, A.Yusupova, an advisor of "Kholimbag" local self-government body, noted that local residents construct houses on sites of former pesticide storage facilities. In one of such new houses, two children of a family became

sick. They applied for medical assistance but a prescribed treatment was useless. Later, adult members of the family also felt ill. Then someone reminded them that earlier, a pesticide storage facility was located at the place of their new house. The family had to resettle to another place urgently. Only after that, health of these children and their parents somehow improved. These examples show that, in addition to ordinary citizens, relevant officials are also extremely poorly aware of POPs-related matters, as these officials issued permits for construction of residential housing at the hazardous site. Moreover, these examples demonstrate negligence of sanitary and epidemiological facilities, bodies of the State Committee for Environment and other organisations that are obliged to monitor such developments and exclude contaminated land areas from economic use.

Other participants of the roundtable also referred to similar examples with tragic consequences that are fairly familiar for local residents. Many participants noted that a strong smell of pesticides is felt in windy weather near the area of the former agricultural aviation airstrip "Kipchak" (Amudariinskiy district). Local residents experience respiratory problems, while many children were even hospitalised with allergies.

The meeting participants expressed their serious concerns about uncontrolled sales of pesticides for combating insects - these pesticides are delivered illegally from Turkmenistan (Amudariinskiy district border Turkmenistan). These pesticides are sold at market places and traders keep pesticides with fruits and vegetables. Local residents have no information on rules of safe storage and application of these pesticides, as a result, they simply scatter pesticide dusts in their residential rooms where they sleep and eat.

Many participants of the roundtable were concerned about application of pesticides in gardens. Many different pesticides are sold without limitations at marketplaces (mainly of Chinese production). District residents buy these pesticides and apply them in their gardens, using amounts they feel appropriate.

Conclusions

In general, these meetings demonstrated that it is necessary to implement a comprehensive program to raise awareness of all residents of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, at the republic level, with involvement of TV, radio, printed media outlets and local self-government bodies. To this end, it is necessary to implement a preliminary social study to assess current awareness levels, locations of pesticide burial sites, their protection quality, etc.

B) Publication of the newsletter and information dissemination

The newsletter was developed (see the Annex). Publication of the newsletter on POPs ("Along the Amu...") is scheduled for May 15. With assistance of the Women's Committee, the newsletter, reports on the roundtables and comics will be disseminated among residents of districts, where roundtables were conducted, mass media outlets and NNOs. Besides that, a set of documents will be developed for district *khakimiats*.

The newsletter issue is enclosed to the report without layout and photos. The issue will be submitted in PDF format.

C) The briefing for journalists

In the course of the briefing we presented the results of the project and distributed the set of informational materials to the journalists present. In addition, members of the Working Groups argued that journalists should ensure media coverage of the problem of POPs that is fairly urgent in the Republic of Karakalpakstan now. Joint lobbying efforts of NNOs, mass media outlets and the public would allow pressure to be placed on the national level and initiate ratification of the Stockholm Convention by Uzbekistan. The briefing participants decided to disseminate our newsletter and comics after March 15 in mass media outlets.

D) Difficulties, we encountered in the course of the project implementation

1. According to the project plan we expected to conduct a roundtable in Shumanaiskiy district of the Republic. However, the event was not approved and we had to conduct the roundtable in another district with similarly acute problems of POPs (Nukuskiy district).
2. Taking into account that the problem of POPs is practically suppressed in our region, scientists and specialists of Karakalpak Subsidiary of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan refused to participate in our project.
3. Due to some steps of the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, many NNOs, including environmental ones, had to cease their activities. Governmental bodies are not inclined to co-operate with NNOs. Unfortunately enough, it is rather difficult to launch an information campaign alone.
4. In connection with some unofficial information release limitations, the Public Health Ministry of the Republic of Karakalpakstan cannot provide actual facts and figures for publication in mass media outlets.
5. Newspaper prices (including prices for subscribers) are fairly high and their circulation in the Republic of Karakalpakstan is low. As a result, relevant media publications could not be read by many residents. We failed to involve TV channels to media coverage of these issues, due to high prices of their services and governmental control.
6. Publication of the special issue of the newsletter was somehow delayed due to problems of NNO "The Union for Protection of the Aral Sea" (the Ministry of Justice of the RK demanded the NNO to terminate its activities).
7. The quality of publishing services in the RK is rather low, while providers of publishing services charge high prices, so we decided to publish the newsletter and comics in Tashkent; however, the decision was associated with the need for additional time and efforts of the project implementation team.

E) Our plans

Accounting for the low awareness of our citizens of adverse health impacts of POPs, participants of roundtable discussions decided:

1. To implement research projects and social studies in districts of the republic in order to assess the POPs-related situation and former pesticide storage facilities.
2. It is necessary to rehabilitate sites of former pesticide storage facilities with involvement of scientists and specialists.
3. To apply to the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, requesting to enact a special regulation, stipulating bans on burning of dry leaves, household waste and municipal waste at landfills.
4. To implement a media campaign on "Producing organic fertilisers instead of burning of dry leaves and waste!"
5. It is necessary to produce social video-adverts on POPs-related hazards, for a broad dissemination of information via TV channels.
6. To impose a strict ban on selling pesticides at marketplaces, to make managers of these marketplaces and law enforcement bodies responsible for control of sales of pesticides.
7. To raise public awareness by means of meetings, seminars and roundtables; to implement information campaigns in schools, lyceums, colleges, institutes.
8. We, staff members of "Women for Sustainable Development" Centre, accounting for the contemporary level of public awareness, decided to conduct one more roundtable discussion in the Northern district of the republic (Takhtakupyrskiy district). A report on the roundtable will be submitted after completion of the event.