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International POPs Elimination Project

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

Capacity building and public awareness- raising on health care waste and incineration

**Cavite Green Coalition/Institute for the Development of
Educational & Ecological Alternatives (IDEAS) Inc.**

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**Philippines
March 2006**

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>

IPEN gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Global Environment Facility, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Swiss Agency for the Environment Forests and Landscape, the Canada POPs Fund, the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (VROM), Mitchell Kapor Foundation, Sigrid Rausing Trust, New York Community Trust and others.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily the views of the institutions providing management and/or financial support.

This report is available in the following languages: English

Capacity building and public awareness-raising on health care waste and incineration

Trece Martires City, Province of Cavite, Philippines

Project Objectives:

1. To raise awareness about the dangers of incinerator plants and to provide information about alternative non-burn technologies for hospital waste
2. To generate concrete data that will enrich the dialogue between communities, local political and medical authorities and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) regarding the implementation of the Clean Air Act particularly its provisions on pollution prevention

Project Accomplishments

The project was conceptualized to generate the data needed to raise awareness about POPs and the dangers of incinerator plants and to work for the enforcement of the Clean Air Act. The context of the project was a community campaign to generate awareness and public support to close down a single batch starved-air incinerator for health care wastes disguised as a “pyrolysis” incinerator plant in Barangay Aguado, Trece Martires City, Philippines. The incinerator violates the Clean Air Act of 1999, which bans waste incineration, to wit:

“Incineration, hereby defined as the burning of municipal, bio-medical and hazardous wastes, which process emits poisonous and toxic fumes, is hereby prohibited.” (Section, Republic Act 8749, the Philippine Clean Air Act of 1999).

The project was implemented in partnership with the Ecological Waste Coalition of the Philippines (Ecowaste Coalition). The Cavite Green Coalition (CGC) primarily took charge of the following activities:

1. Technical Analysis on Dioxin Emissions

Together with De La Salle University of Dasmarias and members of the Ecowaste Coalition, an egg sampling activity took place in Barangay Aguado that was then coordinated for laboratory analysis through IPEN. Test results of the free-range chicken eggs collected in the village found levels of dioxin nearly 10 times higher than the limit for eggs set by the European Union (EU). Additionally the level of PCBs in the eggs exceeded the proposed EU limit. The most obvious potential source of POPs releases to the community is the incineration plant that burns medical waste. Based on the findings, the CGC, along with other allied groups, proposed a number of recommendations to concerned parties, including the enforcement of the incineration ban to prevent formation and release of unintended POPs from waste burners, and the replacement of the medical waste incinerator with a non-combustion alternative that does not generate POPs.

2. Collation of the Social and Political Dimensions of the Barangay Aguado Campaign

The data shows the following social and political dimensions of the campaign.

A. Social Justice Issues

The community is a resettlement area for the urban poor most of whom came from a community within a city dumpsite. They were moved from that community so that they could be safe from pollution; ironically what they originally thought as a safe and healthy community free from pollution only again to be exposed to the same problems. A medical fact finding done after the egg sampling analysis showed that 300 children were suffering from respiratory and skin diseases; one case of anemia; and one case of genital deformity.

Public hearings are required in permitting environmentally sensitive projects to operate but in many cases the public is not fully informed as happened in the Aguado case. At first, the local people saw the facility as a source of employment and as a benefactor that provided scholarship for some of the children in the community. Later, as problems with the facility became obvious (including its violation of federal law); the community became divided over the issue. Thus, subsequently, the petition for closure was seen as a threat by the village officials and some of the community members. The experience showed the community that public hearings should never be taken for granted because they provide a space for participation in decision-making.

B. Political Dimensions

a. Local politics - The data showed how local authorities only became aware of the risks of facilities such as a medical waste incinerator when they were confronted with the issue. The decision to permit such facilities usually only consider employment and the revenues it will generate, and not the large body information linking medical waste incineration to the production and emission of POPs such as dioxins and furans.. It also showed the lack of knowledge about medical waste management in general and the range of options that they need to consider in decision-making.

b. National politics - The issue mobilized the national politicians from Congress and the Senate to revisit the Clean Air Act in relation to medical waste management. This has allowed the Coalition to provide the decision makers with alternative options that do not require incineration and do not generate POPs.

CGC and the community members of Aguado concluded that environmental justice is a goal that needs the joint efforts at the local and national levels and that there should be stronger information and education efforts especially at the local level.

The data also showed that CGC advocacy should also be more focused on ensuring that local decision makers become better informed about ecological waste management, particularly on alternative options that they may consider.

3. Packaging and Dissemination of the Campaign Materials

Ecowaste Coalition assisted the Cavite Green Coalition (CGC) in the preparation and dissemination of press releases about the issue. CGC also updated its primer on the incinerator issue. The television and print media were invited on 21 April 2005 for a pre-Earth Day mass action to urge the authorities to prevent toxic pollution. It was during this event that Ecowaste Coalition and the CGC formally released the report of the Philippine egg sampling.

The information materials were also used in the letter campaign to solicit signatures for the closure of the incinerator plant. The campaign was able to gather 8,000 signatures. Members of the campaign team also did radio interviews about the dioxin contamination in several radio programs.

4. Utilizing the Research Results for the Dialogues with Government and the Incinerator Company

The research results were also formally presented in a forum organized on 23 April 2005 together with Health Care Without Harm. Local government officials from the concerned community and community members attended this forum. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) was provided a copy of the findings and with pressure from the signature campaign, it called for Technical Conferences together with the concerned company, the Integrated Waste Management Inc. to discuss the issue. As a result, the DENR called for the formation of a Multi-Partite Monitoring Company and for the company to submit to a Third Party laboratory analysis of their emissions.

5. Promoting Non-Burn Alternatives for Treating Medical Waste

The campaign provided CGC and other concerned NGOs the venue to draw attention to the availability of non-incineration approaches and systems for managing waste from health care institutions. In our discussions with community members, with public officials, service providers and the media, we emphasized the need for volume and toxicity reduction of the waste stream through environmentally preferable purchasing, segregation at source to maximize recycling and reduce the contamination of recyclable discards with infectious materials. We emphasized that waste minimization and segregation are key components of an ecological hospital waste plan, so as to ensure environmental protection, workers' safety and health, cost reductions, compliance with waste regulations, and improved community relations.

As for the treatment of the infectious component of the waste stream, we informed stakeholders about alternative non-burn treatment options such as low-heat technologies

(autoclave, microwave and other steam-based systems), chemical-based disinfection technologies, biological and other technologies where burning is not involved.

In our advocacy for safer alternatives to waste incineration, we also drew attention to the Precautionary Principle, which states:

“When an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. In this context the proponent of an activity, rather than the public, should bear the burden of proof.”

PROJECT OUTCOMES:

The project anticipated the following results and outcomes:

- Stronger and wider support for the enforcement of the ban on waste incinerators under the Clean Air Act.
- More informed decision making by community stakeholders in the selection of waste treatment options for hospital waste

Actual Outcomes

The research and accompanying campaign activities generated interest from both national and local officials. Representatives of the Committee on Ecology in the House of Senate and House of Representatives visited the community and tabled an agenda for a discussion of technologies for managing medical waste. However, the subsequent political crisis on the “Garci tapes” implicating President Arroyo’s electoral fraud derailed the discussion of the incinerator issue.

At the local level, some local officials were convinced about the dangers of the incinerator plant in their jurisdiction and the need for closure of the facility. But the Mayor was not convinced and thus, there was no consensus on the closure demand by the coalition.

At the level of the provincial government, the campaign mobilized the Provincial Environment and Natural Resources office to be more vigilant about monitoring waste facilities.

For the different sectors reached by the campaign, there was an increase in awareness of non-burn alternatives for medical waste and also the need for waste avoidance, waste segregation and recycling.

At the national level, the campaign pushed the DENR to be more vigilant in their regulatory and monitoring activities. The company failed to renew its permit to operate because it was unable to comply with the requirements for third party laboratory analysis.

At the community level, there was stronger consensus and greater motivation to fight for their rights and to publicly press for the closure of the facility