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International POPs Elimination Project

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

Awareness Campaign and People's Dialogue on POPs in the Cotton Belt of Punjab

Kheti Virasat Mission

**India
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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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Awareness Campaign and People's Dialogue on POPs in the Cotton Belt of Punjab

BACKGROUND

Punjab is one of the highest pesticide consumers in the India. It was once the highest user of a few of the POPs also. Several studies clearly indicate that blood samples taken from Punjab have high contents of POPs and other pesticides.

The farmers burn paddy and wheat straw every six months after the harvest. This practice produces large amounts of deadly dioxin and furans. According to an estimate, over 60% of the farmers are adopting this practice. This makes the region one of the highest POPs producing regions of India.

Punjab has the highest percentage of cultivable land in the country i.e. 87% with the highest cropping density (188%) and consumes the highest amount of pesticides per hectare (923 gm/hectare), which is four times higher than the India's national average.

JUSTIFICATION

This high amount of pesticide use is posing severe environmental health threat to the people and ecological equilibrium of Punjab. To save the future generations of Punjab, there is a need to initiate people's action today, since tomorrow may be too late.

With this objective KHETI VIRASAT MISSION (KVM) with support under IPEP undertook a mass education and awareness programme to build a participatory community movement aimed at eliminating POPs and seeking a replacement of these deadly pesticides.

ACTIVITIES OVERVIEW

Under this intervention, KVM planned to organise eight peoples' dialogues at different locations spanning the cotton belt. KVM has organised five peoples' dialogues. These dialogues were organised at Abohar, Muktsar, Faridkot, Giddarbaha, and Lehragaga (Sangrur)

In addition to the peoples' dialogue at local level, KVM also organized a similar initiative in Chandigarh, the state capital of Punjab with the intent of highlighting the issue of POPs at higher levels. This programme was the first of its kind in Chandigarh.

Since the farmers got busy with the harvesting of wheat, the remaining three programmes would be taken up in June (in the Rabi season). These would be organized at Ferozepur, Bathinda and Talwandi Sabo.

KVM also organized over 40-village level meetings in order to mobilize and educate farmers on POPs.

RESPONSE

- All the programmes were well attended. Participants were largely farmers, youth activists, academicians, health professionals, agriculture experts, local/ village governing council members and women.
- For the first time in Punjab, a public debate on POPs was generated and most of people came across the information on POPs for the first time. The subject was totally new for them.
- Participants showed keenness in knowing more about POPs and the environmental health impacts of pesticides. They offered to join movement against POPs and Pesticides as volunteers. Some school teachers offered their time during the summer vacation for awareness and education on POPs and Pesticides. KVM has collected over 80 applications/ names.
- The farmers had turned in large numbers in these programmes and pledged not to burn paddy/wheat straw in their fields.
- It was resolved in the dialogues that Punjab Government should establish a POPs Cell at the State Pollution Control Board and all the Universities in the State.
- People demanded that Punjab government should publish a Status Paper on POPs in Punjab.
- As these dialogues were organised in only one out of four eco-cultural regions of state it was also felt that such programmes should also be extended to other regions of Punjab.
- The Central Council of Punjabi Writers, *Kendriya Punjabi Lekhak Sabha*, through its General Secretary Mr Harmeet Vidyarathi conveyed its solidarity with the cause and hence offered literary and creative contribution through play scripts, folk songs and other means to help build up a community movement against the POPs and Pesticides.
- A special meeting was held with creative artists to draw an action plan and to identify issues for literary writings on impacts of POPs and Pesticides.

Details of Peoples' Dialogues Organised

Sr. No	Date	Location	Resource Persons	No. of Participants
1	20-8-05	Badal (Giddarbaha)	Dr.S.G.Kabra Ananthpadamnabhan Dr.G.P.I.Singh Iyan Biswas Kavitha Kuruganti	150
2	29-10-05	Muktsar	Dr.S.G.Kabra	120
3	26-12-05	Faridkot	Umendra Dutt Ajay Tripathi	100
4	11-2-06	Lehragaga	Krishan Jakhar Ajay Tripathi	100
5	12 -3 -06	Abohar	Dr.Rakesh Sehgal Umendra Dutt	80
6	6-5-06	Chandigarh	Dr.T.K.Joshi Dr.B.D.Gupta Dr.G.P.I. Singh Mr.Chander Bhushan Ms. Madhumitta Dutta Dr.Davinder Sharma Mr.Iyan Biswas	65

IMPACT

- KVM has since been receiving large number of queries from the farmers, teachers, and youth activists and even from housewives, regarding the impacts of POPs on women and children and its remedy.
- Lawyers have come forward and offered their services to take up the issue of impacts of POPs and role of the State government in the court by filing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL).
- Several farmers have, after attending the programme, shunned the burning of paddy/wheat straw.
- KVM has formed a brigade of youth volunteers to fight against the menace of POPs and Pesticides.
- Local Punjabi Television (Doordarshan) had organised a live talk show on the health impacts of pesticides and POPs.
- As a major indicator of success, KVM got legal notices from the Pesticide Manufacturers and their Associations for damaging the pesticide industry through its campaign against pesticides. The pesticide lobby has gone to the extent of frustration by issuing legal notices to all the resource persons invited for the Peoples' dialogue on POPs and Pesticides held at Chandigarh on 6 May 2006. The pesticide lobby has been issuing letters to KVM asking it to withdraw its campaign against pesticides and threatening to take it to the court for damage suit of Rs 5 crores.

FUTURE PLANS

Besides organizing the remaining three Peoples' Dialogues at Ferozepur, Bathinda, and Talwandi Sabo in June, the future plans include:

- Seminars in university, regional centres and select engineering and degree colleges.
- A two days workshop on POPs for the department of environmental sciences at University and engineering colleges with the support from Punjab Pollution Control Board.
- A poster campaign on POPs to educate the masses.
- KVM plans to involve the Indian Medical Association (IMA) and the National Integrated Medical Association (NIMA) the two most important associations of medical professionals in the campaign against POPs.