Frequently asked questions about mercury contaminated sites

December 2016

What does the Minamata Convention say about guidance on contaminated sites?

The Minamata Convention requires the Conference of Parties to develop and adopt guidance on mercury contaminated sites under Article 12 that may include the following; (a) Site identification and characterization; (b) Engaging the public; (c) Human health and environmental risk assessments; (d) Options for managing the risks posed by contaminated sites; (e) Evaluation of benefits and costs; and (f) Validation of outcomes.

Why is guidance on contaminated sites important for countries?

A guidance on contaminated sites would build country ability to identify hazardous sites and prioritize them for action and generate meaningful data on mercury pollution for Minamata Initial Assessments (MIA) and in some cases for National Actions Plans (NAP). The guidance would also facilitate access to GEF funding since governments at INC7 agreed that capacity building for the development of strategies to identify and assess contaminated sites qualifies for GEF funding.[1] However, it is difficult for many countries to access funding to develop these strategies without a guidance document.

Why is there still no Convention guidance on contaminated sites?

After the issue was delayed at INC6, delegates took up the issue of contaminated sites at INC 7 in 2016. A large number of countries[2] submitted CRP9 calling for the secretariat to prepare a draft guidance document on contaminated sites for consideration at COP1. However, a developed country and regional economic integration organization effectively blocked the proposal and the final decision merely asks the secretariat to collect information on the topic and create an outline of guidance structure and content for consideration at COP1.[3]

How can mercury contaminated sites be identified?

The IPEN guidance systematically describes methods to identify mercury contaminated sites including descriptions of rapid screening instruments that can be used with minimal training to identify sites without expensive laboratory analysis. Combining such screening methods with historical knowledge of the site allows agencies, NGOs and the local community to contribute to preliminary site investigation. This potentially allows a large number of sites to be identified rapidly and included in the MIA. Systematic soil analysis at laboratories can be expanded during a detailed site investigation which is described in detail in the guidance and sites can be ranked according to the potential harm they present to the public and environment.

---

[1] UNEP (2016) Annex V. Draft guidance to the Global Environment Facility on overall strategies, policies, programme priorities and eligibility for access to and utilization of financial resources as well as on an indicative list of categories of activities that could receive support from the Global Environment Facility Trust Fund, UNEP(DTIE)/Hg/INC.7/22

[2] . The African region (54 countries), Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, India, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Norway, Pakistan, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Saint Lucia, Samoa, Saudi Arabia, Palestine and Switzerland

[3] UNEP (2016) Annex XII. Draft guidance on the management of contaminated sites, UNEP(DTIE)/Hg/INC.7/22

How can mercury contaminated sites be managed or remediated?
The IPEN guidance describes a range of techniques that can be used to manage and remediate sites that have been investigated and characterised. Its flexibility means it can be used to conduct broad scale activities (such as site identification for inventories) or can be applied to more intensive investigation and remediation of a small number of priority sites The guidance describes two approaches to remediation.
1) Site specific risk assessment - This approach calculates human and environmental exposure to mercury at a given site based on known pathways (soil, water, food, atmosphere) and then partially cleans or remediates the site up to fall within concentrations that humans and environmental receptors can 'tolerate' (according to risk assessment calculations).
2) Ecologically sustainable remediation - This progressive approach incorporates sustainability principles such as the Precautionary Principle, the Principle of Intergenerational Equity (protection of future generations) and the Polluter Pays principle. Under this approach the site is returned to the cleanest possible levels given available technological capabilities to allow for the most sensitive possible uses of the land into the future (such as food production and residential occupation).

What is the scientific and technical basis for addressing contaminated sites?
The IPEN guidance draws upon contemporary scientific literature regarding human health and environmental impacts of mercury contaminated sites as well as recent global technology and engineering reviews related to site management and remediation. Most of the approaches have been proven over many years in the field however some emerging techniques are also discussed. The screening techniques to identify sites have been used for at least a decade and are recognised assessment technologies.

Can governments develop practical measures and policy frameworks to address this issue in partnership with civil society?
Yes – a highlight of the guidance is that it has been developed to allow communities affected by mercury contaminated sites, NGOs and government agencies to work together to generate data on suspected contaminated sites. Some of the site screening techniques when preceded with suitable operator training and a health and safety briefings, can be conducted by civil society organisations. This can be a significant benefit to national environmental agencies with limited resources to help build an inventory of suspected and proven contaminated sites.

Do governments support action on contaminated sites?
Yes, the IPEN *Guidance on the identification, management and remediation of mercury contaminated sites* was supported as the basis of formal development of guidance by many countries at INC7. Since then some European and African countries have submitted this guidance to the Interim Secretariat of the Minamata Convention as part of the preparations for COP1 in 2017. Among others, these countries have recognised that the guidance contains valuable policy and technical information that advances the objective of the Minamata Convention to reduce human exposure to mercury pollution while returning land to productive use and holding polluters accountable. For this reason, governments are encouraged to recommend to the Interim Secretariat that this guidance be included as the basis for treaty policy.

Where can I download a copy of the guidance?
The guidance is currently available for download from the IPEN website in English and will soon be available in other languages: http://ipen.org/documents/guidance-identification-management-and-remediation-mercury-contaminated-sites-0
For more information contact Lee Bell – Mercury Policy Advisor IPEN (leebell@ipen.org)