



**a toxics-free future**

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## **International SAICM Implementation Project (ISIP)**

In 2010, in an effort to demonstrate SAICM implementation via IPEN Participating Organizations, IPEN launched an International SAICM Implementation Project, also known as ISIP. ISIP aims to mobilize resources for initial enabling activities pertaining to national priorities, in keeping with the work areas set out in the strategic objectives of section IV of the SAICM Overarching Policy Strategy.

In particular, the ISIP supports the Governance objective of SAICM's Overarching Policy Strategy paragraph 26, which calls for enhanced "cooperation on the sound management of chemicals between Governments, the private sector and civil society at the national, regional and global levels."

In addition, ISIP builds on the 2008-2009 Global SAICM Outreach Campaign to raise awareness about SAICM and strengthen collaboration among the public interest, health and labor sectors.

### **ISIP Objectives**

ISIP's four objectives include:

- Promoting the need for sound chemicals management
- Advancing National SAICM Implementation
- Promoting global SAICM implementation by global civil society
- Building capacity among NGOs developing countries and countries with economies in transition

**Title of activity:** Mercury Free Campaign in Schools

**NGO:** Pesticide Action Network (PANeM)

**Country:** Mauritius

**Date:** August, 2012

### **Elements of SAICM Covered:**

Promote reduction of the risks posed to human health and the environment (57); Help develop comprehensive national profiles or country situation reports about mercury (1, 166); Programs to monitor mercury to assess exposure (66, 82); Promote the development and use of products and processes that pose lesser risks (44); Take immediate action to reduce the risk to human health and the environment posed on a global scale by mercury in products and production processes (59); Participation in activities related to the negotiation of a legally binding instrument on mercury

### **Description of mercury that is available in the market:**

The most common forms include medical health care equipment, dental amalgam, energy saving lightings and button cell batteries.

**Description of the most common forms of mercury exposure:**

Dental amalgam, broken thermometer, energy saving bulbs, sphygmomanometer, laboratory reagents, antiseptics and button cell batteries.

**Description of human sources of mercury:**

In schools, broken thermometers and fluorescent lamps are treated like normal waste. They are swept, collected and are thrown in the same class bin and later in the same school bin. Button cell batteries from individual electronic calculators are often treated as curious objects and broken to open. In case of small wounds children are treated with the well-known “mercure au chrome,” which, as the name implies, contains mercury. There is also the case of dentists throwing dental amalgam into the waste stream that releases mercury into the environment.

**Description of the levels of mercury release and exposure:**

The only data available on mercury in Mauritius is the amount of elemental mercury entering the country. However, we do not have the figures as we did not know, until now, that there is possibility of available data on it.

**Description of the damage caused by mercury:**

There are no current known or reported mercury threats in Mauritius. It has not been known to exist even in the past. Apart from jewellers and the dentists handling mercury and mercury amalgam on a daily basis, there are other specific groups like school children and individuals with dental amalgams exposed to mercury.

**Description of the laws currently regulating mercury:**

There exists the “Dangerous Chemicals Act” in Mauritius. It regulates the import and use of mercury into the country. Importing mercury into the country requires a permit. The “Occupational and Safety Act” in Mauritius follows up workers dealing with mercury. How it is enforced is the question. By the time the Act was promulgated, terms like “Mercury in products” or mercury containing articles were not even thought of in Mauritius. It is a gap and the Act needs to be reviewed and amended.

**Description of the efforts to deal with mercury:**

There has been no decision as such but the Ministry of Health has appealed to all dentists to phase out mercuric dental amalgam. Government is also phasing out mercury containing health care equipment in public hospitals.

**Description of what forces support and oppose the Mercury Treaty, the public participation consultation process, and the level of public awareness of the treaty process:**

The issue has not been exposed to the public. We understand that there is a Committee on Mercury at the Ministry of Health but there is no NGO participation. We must confess that until the implementation of this project in schools, mercury has not even been considered as toxic and as a problem. Neither government nor any NGO had ever raised the issue. It is thanks to this project of the Pesticide Action Network that the authorities, the schools and the public are being made aware. The public is not even aware of the ongoing Mercury Treaty.

**Project Outcome:**

**Description of the activity conducted:**

The activity conducted by the Pesticide Action Network- Mauritius was to raise awareness of mercury use in schools. Two thousand booklets on Mercury Free Schools were published to support the activity. Three resource persons assured the lectures with power point

presentations followed by Questions and Answers during half-day workshops for higher secondary school students. Out of the two thousand copies produced, almost all have been distributed in schools. The few copies kept are for the Association's use, for partners and donors. About nine hundred students had direct interaction excluding management, teachers and school library.

While doing an inventory of the laboratory in some of the selected schools, teachers were surprised to learn that they were so many mercury containing products, excluding the metal itself that they were dealing with everyday. Having been exposed to the toxicity of mercury and the danger it represents to the school children, teachers and all employees, management has, in principle, agreed to change for mercury free alternatives the soonest possible. School managers are ready to advocate and support the campaign of the Pesticide Action Network for a Mercury Free Schools.

### **Impact on target groups:**

We had two distinct target groups:

- (i) The management and science teaching staff, and
- (ii) Higher School Certificate (HSC/GCE "A" Level) students.

To initiate the project in the selected schools, a comprehensive letter was addressed to the Manager/Rector of the schools followed by a personal contact/meeting to expose the project, its aim and objectives. It was then followed by a meeting with the science teaching and laboratory staff. The third step was a half-day workshop with students of the final secondary class (HSC/GCE "A" Level)

The activity has been an eye opener to all. People in the school environment had never realized that they were operating in such a toxic environment; and that was for lack of awareness on the toxicity of mercury in all its forms. Conscious of the fact that alternatives to mercury exist, they have all pledged for mercury free laboratory and a mercury free school environment.

### **Impact on target policies:**

The pilot project was used for policy advocacy to spur government action in prohibiting mercury in schools. It also had as policy to ensure that any generated mercury in school laboratories or waste equipment containing mercury is sent for terminal storage and not into the usual municipal waste stream.

The immediate reaction from schools is that elemental mercury and waste equipment containing mercury will not go into the usual waste stream. But here we realized that there is no other facility for terminal storage. No one has even talked about it. Since it is all dependent on policy decision and storage facility, we have come to realize that our proposed policy advocacy to spur government on a mercury policy in schools is not for the immediate. We are expecting government action as interim measures in schools, but not as policy as such.

### **Outreach to stakeholders:**

The school management, science teachers and higher school students were involved in this activity. Great interest was shown by all these stakeholders. The desire and eagerness to shift to non-mercury devices in school laboratories was very apparent and pronounced. The fact that they have all realized the negative effect of mercury on human health: like physical disabilities, brain damage and mental retardation to babies whose mothers were highly exposed to mercury during pregnancy; kidney effects and respiratory failure; and, damages to stomach and nerves including the reproductive health system, a very good relationship has been established with the stakeholders for future partnership.

### **Deliverables, outputs and/or products:**

The objective is to propose a mercury elimination strategy in schools. After this first activity, PANeM prepared a press release on the pilot project. We published two training modules followed by workshops and project reports.

**Communication efforts:**

PANeM has good relationship with the media. We released a press release on the activity. Journalists and reporters from several dailies and two weeklies have promised for interviews and press coverage. Once released, everything will be forwarded to IPEN and the African Anglophone Hub.

**SAICM National Focal Point:**

Dr I. Bundhoo,  
Ministry of Health and Quality of Life, Head Occupational Health Unit,  
Atchia Building, Port Louis, Mauritius

**Recommendations, from a public interest, NGO perspective, on reducing and eliminating human sources of mercury:**

Mercury is not produced in Mauritius and there are no gold mines or gold extractions. Importation of element mercury is the only source of mercury and is meant for dental amalgam and in jewellery. Mauritius imported mercury-containing products mainly in medical health care devices.

We are aware that government is gradually replacing mercury thermometers by electronic ones, sphygmomanometers also will be replaced but the present policy is not to dispose of existing ones. Antiseptics containing mercury have already been replaced in public hospitals. Dentists have been advised to phase out mercury amalgam in tooth fillings. Mercury containing “economic lightings” have been encouraged by government subsidized to encourage people to save on energy consumption in the interest of “Carbon Credits.” There is also the question of no other alternative and also that the mercury content is so low. With affordable alternatives, we are confident that the government can or will reduce and eliminate, wherever possible, human sources of mercury in Mauritius.