



## **Moderator's summary of the outcomes of high-level round table on public health, the environment and chemicals,**

1. As part of the high level segment of the second session of the International Conference on Chemicals Management a round table was held on public health, the environment and chemicals on Friday 15 May, 2009. The Round Table was opened by Dr Ivan Erzen, President of the International Conference on Chemicals Management, who reminded the audience that the focus of the session would be on how to improve the synergies between health and the environment to build on the good work that was already in place around the world. In this regard, the President welcomed the fact that the Conference had the day before agreed a resolution on the health aspects of the sound management of chemicals.

2. The participants in the Round Table were: Professor David Mwakyusa, Minister of Health & Social Welfare, Tanzania; Dr Jadamba Tsolmon, Vice Minister of Health, Mongolia; Mrs Elisabet Falemo, State Secretary, Environment Ministry, Sweden; Dr Maria Neira, Director of Public Health and Environment, WHO; Mr Ben van Beurden, Executive Vice President, Shell Chemicals; Dr Rob Visser, Environmental Health and Safety Division, OECD; and Dr Peter Orris, World Federation of Public Health Associations. The session was moderated by Mr Paul Hohnen.

3. Responding to an invitation to frame the current context in relation to chemicals production and related health impacts, Dr Neira pointed to the gap between our knowledge of the widespread human health impacts of poor chemicals management and the ability to respond in a timely and commensurate manner through policy, financial and procedural actions. Noting that globally high percentage of the total disease burden can be attributable to the environment, including chemicals exposure, she urged governments, the private sector and civil society to explore the synergies and opportunities for building on the co-benefits of improved chemicals management and a better integration of health expertise and knowledge in all areas of chemical management.

4. The Round Table then moved into a panel discussion focusing on three elements. These were:

- global trends in chemicals production, the potential impacts on human health, and the implications for sustainable development;
- the current level of engagement of the health sector in the SAICM process and lessons learned; and
- ideas for improving current approaches to the health aspects of sound chemicals management.

5. Themes that ran throughout the panel discussion included:
- Production in chemicals was rising at the global level, with increasing production in emerging economies. OECD data suggested that this trend would continue at least until 2030 as a result of rising demand for the services chemicals provided.
  - While good progress was being made in our understanding of the impacts of many chemicals, a great deal remained to be clarified, including in relation to their short and long term impacts and additional information on chemicals-related burden of disease. In some cases, existing knowledge was not well shared or understood.
  - Countries ranged in their understanding of, and capacities to understand, monitor and respond to chemical incidents and exposures. In this respect, capacity building and financial support were critical areas for attention. WHO and UNEP interventions, including within the SAICM framework, were playing an important role. The establishment of poisons treatment centres was an important step in this context, but it was also necessary that awareness of such centres was well known.
  - There were also differences in the extent to which countries were able to integrate the health sector in sound chemicals management strategies and action plans. Learning based on response to incidents underlined the value of a coordinated approach. Promotion of the involvement of health professionals early in the policy process, with necessary support for capacity, could help both to reduce the impact of chemicals used in modern society, and to improve the response capacity to accidents, where sometimes the health sector was only involved after the fact. Coordination could be improved by the establishment of national mechanisms which integrate SAICM and focal points for international agreements relating to chemicals, and by working through interministerial processes such as that exemplified by implementation of the Libreville Declaration on health and environment interlinkages.
  - Frustration was expressed at the fragmentation of chemicals management policies, at both the international and national levels. This created confusion among stakeholders, raised transaction costs, and often made it harder for the private sector to engage in an appropriate manner. At the same time, however, it was recognised that there was no single policy solution. Chemicals and their impacts were very diverse in nature and required issue-specific action. This might take the form of regulations, private sector initiatives (e.g. common standards, product stewardship), or partnership approaches.
  - While SAICM had played a valuable role in promoting policy coherence, there remained scope for improved consultation and coordination at national, regional and international levels, including with regard to the recognition of the health sector and its integration at these levels.

6. While time did not allow for the moderator to summarise the discussion during the meeting, Mr Hohnen's broad conclusions were as follows:

- Humankind's use of chemicals presented cross-cutting challenges and opportunities. Sound environmental policies were good not only for human health, but also sustainable economies, development, nutrition, and so forth. For the SAICM process to attract the level of policy attention and financial support needed to bridge the 'commitment/implementation' gap which both panels had pointed to, greater attention needed to be given to identifying and documenting such co-benefits. This should include economic costs and benefits.
- Concerns regarding the 'fragmentation' of policy approaches needed to be addressed. Discussion was advancing on how to address specific and longstanding issues (e.g. asbestos, mercury, lead in paint). In parallel with the proposal identified in the Finance Round Table to explore synergies between existing sources of finance, it might also be timely to explore ways of creating greater policy coherence in relation to the sound management of chemicals at the international level. This could include mapping the landscape of the diverse institutions and approaches that are in use, assessing their relative costs and impacts, and scope for improving coordination between the government, business and civil society sectors. This would be necessary to help the mainstreaming of sound chemicals management.
- At the end of the day, the effectiveness of policies needed to be transparent. Indicators and metrics, and possibly even targets and timetables, needed to be developed to demonstrate progress being made. These should not ignore the need for basic infrastructure such as the number and qualifications of health care providers trained on chemicals issues; the existence and availability of poisons centres and laboratories; improved data on the true global burden of disease attributable to chemicals, as well as more traditional indicators such as incident and injury rates.