

Looking forwards and back

Civil Society Conference in preparation for the World Chemicals Conference (ICCM5)

22nd of September 2023 // Bonn

Key findings:

- Chemicals are linked to exploitative economic practices, environmental degradation and pollution, and harm to human health along the entire value chain.
- The turnover of the chemical industry is enormous, but only a small fraction of this is invested in preventive environmental and health protection and in measures for the safe handling of chemicals. The "Polluter Pays Principle" is not implemented.
- We need a vision that, like the Paris Climate Agreement, contains clear guidelines and a target. A purely voluntary approach is not nearly enough, as responsibility for future generations and a world worth living in is our duty today.
- There are very good, safe methods and options for application as well as non-chemical solutions that make the use of chemicals that are hazardous to health and the environment unnecessary.
- Harmful chemicals threaten many stakeholders, but too few of them are represented in international negotiations.

Introduction

The International Conference on Chemicals (ICCM5) took place in Bonn on 25-29 September. Following intensive negotiations, a new framework agreement on the international management of chemicals was adopted under the umbrella of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The multi-stakeholder process involved representatives of states, academia and science, the private sector as well as international representatives of civil society, who came to Bonn for this event and other preparatory meetings. On 22 September, many of the civil society representatives gathered on the premises of the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection for a half-day civil society conference in preparation for the World Chemicals Conference. The NGO conference was organized by the following organization involved in the Toxic-Free Future Alliance: BUND – Friends of the Earth Germany, European Network for Environmental Medicine, German NGO Forum on Environment and Development, Health and Environment Justice Support, Pesticide Action Network Germany and Women Engage for a Common Future.

With over 80 participants, the pre-conference reached many civil society actors who are already involved in international chemicals processes and were in Bonn for the World Chemicals Conference, as well as some who had barely had any contact with this level before. The challenge and at the same time the opportunity to pick up everyone where they stood, to include them and to open up new perspectives was mastered through a [wide-ranging programme](#).

The conference comprised a panel discussion, a phase of parallel workshops and a fishbowl discussion.

Panel Discussion

What needs to be done to achieve a sound management of chemicals and waste?

Speakers:

- Bettina Hoffmann, *Parliamentary State Secretary, German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection.*
- Mohammed Khashashneh, *Secretary General, Ministry of Environment Jordan*
- Ana Paula Souza, *Human Rights Officer, Executive Office United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*
- Rory O'Neill, *Occupational health and labor standards adviser, International Trade Union Confederation*

Moderator:

- Sascha Gabizon, *Women Engage for a Common Future*

The panellists discussed current problems, possible solutions and identified necessary steps that we urgently need in international chemicals management.

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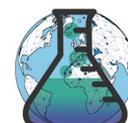


Some of the main aspects of the discussion can be summarised as follows:

We live in a chemical environment. The turnover of the chemical industry is enormous, but only a small fraction of it is invested in preventive environmental and health protection and in measures for the safe handling of chemicals. The "Polluter Pays Principle" is not being implemented. The production, use and disposal of chemical substances and products is linked to exploitative economic practices, environmental destruction and pollution as well as the harm to people's health along the entire value chain. Those who are paid less and work in the informal sector or unregulated labor areas are at a higher risk of being exposed to hazardous chemicals. People in vulnerable situations are particularly affected if they are exposed to hazardous chemicals without knowledge or protection, are unable to take protective measures or leave hazardous workplaces for socio-economic reasons or, like children, are dependent on the protection of others. People are not vulnerable per se, but are exposed to vulnerable situations.

The solution to the chemicals crisis is not limited to the regulation of chemicals alone. The panel called for industry to take responsibility. Industry makes decisions about the production and use of chemicals. These decisions can also be made in favour of people and the environment. The question is often: who decides, who has power? Solutions are therefore not only chemicals-related, but also require other participation processes and decision-making structures. For example, how are employees involved in decision-making processes? Where financial stakes are possible, shareholders of companies and organisations are also jointly responsible for pollution and suffering if they do not influence a sustainable approach.

Bans on particularly hazardous substances and chemicals remain an essential step on the way to sustainable chemicals management. In many cases, NGOs are taking on the task of campaigning for better laws and, above all, demanding more commitment from governments to ban certain particularly hazardous chemicals. We live in a chemical age. People have a right to know what (potentially dangerous) substances are around them and they need to be protected from harmful exposure. This is about the protection of human rights - from the right to a healthy environment and a healthy working environment to the right to information.



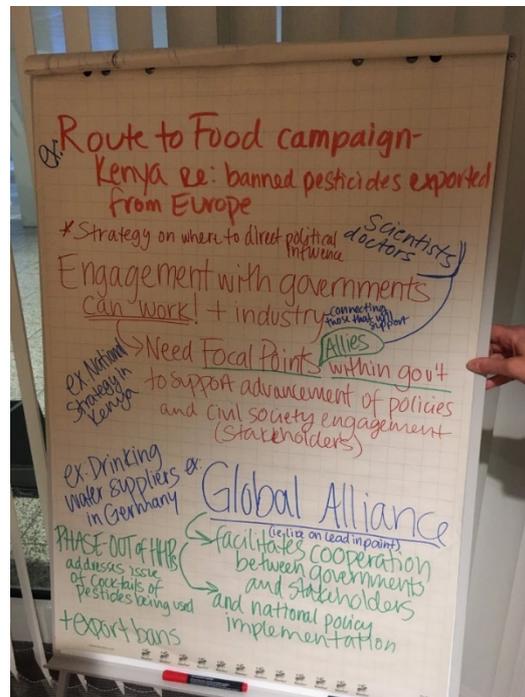
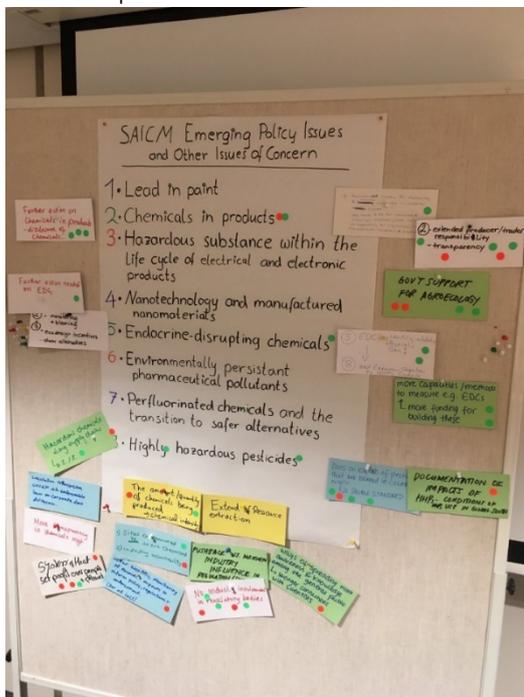
Workshops

1. Workshop: Identify, Address, Solve – sustainable solutions to pressing chemical and waste threats

Moderator: Susan Haffmans (PAN Germany) & Janna Kuhlmann (BUND)

Chemicals, their production and use, cause a number of problems. The predicted rapid increase in production will also exacerbate these problems. Some are significantly more dangerous and more urgent to solve than others. Within the framework of international chemicals management, SAICM has identified eight focus topics, so-called Emerging Policy Issues (EPIs) and Issues of Concern (IoC), as particularly problematic areas that need to be addressed globally. Rules and efforts to resolve the aforementioned focus topics are inadequate or non-existent. These eight topics also represent only a fraction of the substances and problems that urgently need to be addressed. An expansion of the existing focus topics is necessary, but regulated work is also needed so that these do not become a paper tiger. There is currently no clear reduction path for chemical production as a whole. Only less will lead to more sustainability.

The existing IoCs should not be neglected because they already reflect important topics on which there is consensus. In addition, consistent and ambitious work on these transformation processes could trigger them in other policy areas and sectors. "Highly hazardous pesticides" is one of the eight IoCs. In addition to aspects of double standards and transformation, aspects of agroecology can also be addressed when working on this research topic.



2. Workshop: Raise political commitment – the Bonn High level Declaration on track

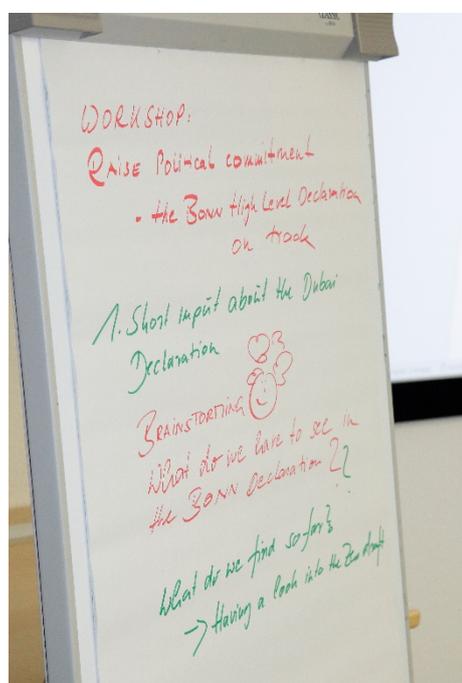
Moderator: Olga Speranskaya (HEJ Support) & Johanna Hausmann (WECF)

This workshop aimed to develop concrete ideas and text proposals for the upcoming High-level Declaration (HLD) and was therefore the most direct preparation for the upcoming week of negotiations. The participants came together and discussed what the HLD absolutely had to contain in order to demonstrate the necessary political will. Not only should the new HLD not fall behind the Dubai Declaration adopted in 2006. In view of the increasing production volumes and growing problems, it should be much more ambitious. These aspects were emphasised in the workshop and repeatedly brought into the negotiations by civil society at ICCM5.

3. Workshop: Strengthening multi-sectoral engagement – Moving towards a strong and global collaboration on chemicals and waste management

Moderator: Giulia Carlini (CIEL) & Florian Schulze (EnvMed)

Multi-stakeholder processes, such as SAICM, have the advantage that they can involve representatives of affected groups. However, it quickly became clear in the workshop that many groups are not represented here either, because in some cases, for example in informal sectors, there are no representatives or structural problems lead to exclusion. This makes it all the more important for international civil society to take these people into account and establish contacts.



Sectors that were explicitly mentioned in the workshop, but have so far been missing in the international context, are, for example, areas of the food industry, such as fishing, which is endangered by environmental pollution, as well as players in the circular economy or water suppliers, who will have to deal with the problem of increasing chemical pollution in the future if they are to provide the services desired by society. However, environmentally friendly companies that play a pioneering role in new productions, safe and non-chemical alternatives would also benefit from a restriction on the use of toxic substances. And even if the health sector is already represented, this sector is also huge and has a large number of stakeholders that have not yet been covered or included, such as people suffering from environmentally-related diseases or health insurance companies.

One thing is clear: people all over the world are exposed to harmful chemicals throughout their lives. However, the degree of exposure and the ability to protect oneself from it vary greatly and depend, for example, on the standard of living, occupation, place of residence, gender or age. The possibility of becoming ill from chemical exposure also depends on genetic disposition.



Fishbowl discussion

Joint discussion about our future work on global chemicals and waste management

Moderator: Alexandra Caterbow (HEJSupport)

A fishbowl discussion allows many people to participate at the same time and provides a good setting for a lively and varied discussion in which all participants have the opportunity to contribute their own arguments, respond to others and generally be able to follow changing topics well. Everyone can take part in the discussion at any time by using free seats. And that's exactly what happened. There was lively discussion and many took the opportunity to address and express their topics and thoughts.

"I didn't know this method before, but it was great. It was so lively and everyone was able to contribute."



During the one-hour discussion, the participants went on a ride through the entire thematic spectrum. The connecting element was that chemicals cause great suffering all over the world. People die every day from contact with highly hazardous pesticides, children come into contact with countless chemicals in their everyday lives that can affect their development and workers are exposed to hazardous substances from plastic waste and electronic waste. The double standards of the global North were repeatedly addressed; if waste is no longer allowed to be exported, it is declared as a donation; double standards in the pesticide trade and the externalisation of costs.

We need a vision that, like the Paris Climate Agreement, contains clear guidelines and a target. A completely voluntary approach is not nearly enough, as responsibility for future generations and a world worth living in is our duty today.



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Acknowledgement

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Thanks also go to all the panelists, moderators and workshop leaders who designed and filled the programme.

Special thanks go to Oliver Baldes, who took the photos.

Thanks to all the participants who often left the regional meetings early to take part in the conference and actively contributed.



The conference is funded by the German Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection. The organizers are solely responsible for the content.

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