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A Global Alliance for a Toxics-Free World

by Alphee September - TGJ Staff JANUARY 24, 2013

As negotiations on a new Mercury Convention wrap up in Geneva, Richard Fuller presents the Global Alliance on Health and Pollution (GAHP), a new collaborative body tasked with coordinating resources and activities to solve toxic pollution problems in low- and middle-income countries.

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The Global Alliance on Health and Pollution participated in the INC5 negotiations as an observer. Could you tell us more about GAHP and its role in addressing toxic pollution?

The Global Alliance on Health and Pollution is a newly formed organization that was created in July last year. Its membership comprises most of the large development agencies – the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Asian Development Bank – UN agencies such as UNEP, UNIDO and WHO (as an observer), and donor agencies such as the European

Commission. The purpose of our organization is to help the developing world deal with toxic hotspots and help them to solve environmental health problems. This is a larger problem than most people are aware of. Some of the research coming out now finds that the amount of health damage caused by chemicals in toxic hotspots is as significant as that of malaria or tuberculosis.

GAHP is a collaborative organization that has Blacksmith Institute as secretariat, and the World Bank and European Commission currently taking the lead in funding resources. One of the activities of the Alliance is to expand the inventory of contaminated sites that Blacksmith had started. In about fifty countries, we have been doing site assessments in places that are potentially toxic and dangerous. In all these countries there are trained investigators - usually staff from the environmental health department of national universities – who go and visit sites and follow through on a protocol that was developed in conjunction with John Hopkins university and Mt Sinai University. It is a rapid-assessment version of the [Superfund](#) USA evaluation protocol, and aims to take enough samples of contaminants to determine if there are toxins at levels that exceed either local standards or US [EPA](#) standards, and then determine if they are in a pathway of exposure into a local population. This is the '3 P method': pollutant, pathway, population. If there are toxins at a level that is significant – usually it reaches a minimum of five times the EPA standard – and there is an affected population, then a set of data is collected that can provide the starting point for that country to be able to

prioritize clean-up operations. Obviously, places where the most number of children are killed or injured should be dealt with first. The Alliance has taken on this role of helping countries in a collaborative way, reviewing and identifying these toxic problems, and assisting in clean-up.

Which standards does GAHP use to assess levels of pollution and decide which toxic sites have priority?

We can use local standards as a reference to determine if the toxin is elevated or not, but if there are no local standards for a particular country, we usually use either EU or US EPA standards. In reality, it does not matter that much which standard you use. For example when looking at lead in soil, standards differ slightly from one country to another. But this can be somewhat irrelevant for our work because most of the sites we measure have contamination levels that are well in excess of these standards anyway.

At the beginning of the final round of negotiations on the new Mercury Convention here in Geneva, David Piper from UNEP's chemical branch said that so far UNEP has mostly been trying to regulate manufactured toxic chemical substances. This time, it is focusing its efforts on mercury, a complex natural element. Do you think this affects the negotiation process in any way?

For us, the fact that mercury is an element rather than a manufactured chemical is not so important. What we are concerned about is whether humans are being damaged by exposure to toxic pollutants. There are certainly natural mercury sources in different countries which affect people who live around them. But the majority of mercury exposures are from human activities, and the largest immediate source of exposure is probably artisanal gold-mining, because mercury there is so localized and concentrated. We see our responsibility to deal with toxic hotspots that were created by humans.

What kind of outcome do you expect from the current Mercury Convention negotiations?

It seems like there is going to be quite a good document coming out of the negotiations. Some of the drafts really have some strength and are calling for substantive action, so I am hopeful. There is not much that deals specifically with cleaning toxic hotspots and the language used is mostly voluntary. But that is fine, we cannot expect governments to commit to such processes and I do not think it is appropriate to include them in a treaty anyway. It is a country's prerogative to decide how to deal with toxic hotspots, according to its own means, so a treaty does not necessarily mean there will be direct requirements to deal with the issues GAHP deals with. This treaty brings attention to the problem and that is what matters for us.

What are the main goals of GAHP for the future?

There is a long way to go. Very few countries are actually doing something about their environmental health problems. In fact, there are only three or four in the developing world. In the West, these problems have been dealt with for decades. But there are neighborhoods and towns with very serious and acute toxic hotspots, some where life expectancy is less than forty. The Alliance will work in a collaborative way to bring resources to all these places through different avenues. We will help them to learn what they need to do and implement programmes that will save lives.

Mercury is one of the problems we face, but the largest and most significant toxicant today is lead. Primary smelters take lead (Pb) ore from the ground and make lead as a raw product or as a by-product from making copper for instance, and the lead then exposes populations living around these smelters. But several times worse than this is informal battery recycling smelting or melting, which is taking place in urban centres in every city throughout the tropics. People collect used car batteries, bust them open with an axe, pull out the lead plates and melt the material that is inside so they can recover the lead. But they throw out all the lead oxide onto the ground which then spreads through the community and poisons children. The lead collected in that way provides an income for many people, but millions of people are badly intoxicated as a result. In our database of acute toxic hotspots, lead is the worst toxin, then chromium, mercury, pesticides, radionuclides and so on. But heavy metals cause the most problems.

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