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Energy, the Environment and the Bottom Line

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## Report Notes Few Toxic Cleanup Successes

By *JOHN COLLINS RUDOLF*

Blacksmith Institute Local contractors in the Dominican Republic managing hazardous materials cleanup at a former battery dumping site.

An international antipollution group turned its gaze toward successes in the cleanup of toxic sites in the developing world, but found few candidates worthy of recognition, according to a report released on Wednesday.

The fourth annual [World's Worst Polluted Places](#) report, by the nonprofit [Blacksmith Institute](#), based in New York, lauded remediation efforts under way in some of the most environmentally troubled places on earth, from mining communities and industrial sites in South America and Africa to overcrowded and desperately polluted cities in Asia.

Global progress on the phaseout of leaded gasoline and the destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles were also singled out for praise.

The report's 12 success stories, all of which showed scientifically verifiable improvements in human health and decreases in environmental toxicity, were more the exception than the rule, said David Hanrahan, director of global operations for the Blacksmith Institute.

"They are only pinpricks of light in the gloom out there," he said.

According to estimates by the [World Health Organization](#), the health of more than one billion people is compromised by exposure to toxic pollution.

The Blacksmith Institute, which compiled the report with the assistance of [Green Cross Switzerland](#), which works to remediate damages caused by industrial and military disasters, highlighted progress made in the fight against global pollution to demonstrate that the problem of environmental contamination is not insurmountable.

But finding success stories in the developing world was not easy. Out of 45 initial candidates, only a dozen were deemed credible, verifiable cases of environmental remediation. "Here we are talking about successes, but there's only 12 of them, and there are literally tens of thousands of polluted sites out there," said Richard Fuller, president of the Blacksmith Institute.

Two success stories were global in scope and represented broad international cooperation: the

phaseout of leaded gasoline, and the worldwide ban on chemical weapons.

According to the report, the use of leaded gasoline – long linked to elevated blood-lead levels in children – is now restricted to 11 countries. The success of the [Chemical Weapons Convention](#), affirmed by 188 countries, was also recognized. Global stockpiles of chemical weapons, including the vast quantities possessed by the United States and Russia, are on pace to be largely eliminated by 2021.

Other examples of progress were site-specific. In Bajos De Haina, Dominican Republic, thousands of cubic meters of soil contaminated by the improper recycling of car batteries – linked to the highest concentration of lead poisoning cases in the world – have been removed from populated areas and disposed of properly.

In Old Korogwe, Tanzania, 86 tons of DDT, a banned pesticide linked to human and animal deaths, were shipped to Germany for incineration.

“The area is now clean and safe for life,” said Dr. Stephan Robinson, of Green Cross Switzerland.

Such remediation projects could be duplicated on a far grander scale, but funding remains limited.

The budget for the Blacksmith Institute is less than \$10 million annually, while spending on environmental remediation efforts in the developing world is \$50 million to \$100 million a year, Mr. Hanrahan estimated. In partnership with the United Nations, the Blacksmith Institute is in the midst of a [global inventory project](#) to identify sites of severe toxic pollution.

So far, more than 1,000 sites have been identified.

Also in development is a [Health and Pollution Fund](#), which hopes to raise up to \$1 billion for global pollution cleanup. That \$1 billion could improve the lives of as many as 100 million people who suffer the effects of toxic pollution, said Mr. Fuller.

Much of this pollution is the legacy of manufacturing that ultimately benefited people in the United States and Europe.

“It’s time for us to move on this and own some responsibility,” said Mr. Fuller.