

# The not so Super COP

The UN is exploring how to bring together the various global chemical treaties, but the pace of change is too slow



Baskut Tuncak  
Staff attorney, CIEL

For the first time, the Conferences of the Parties to three principal treaties for chemicals management met in back-to-back sessions from 26 April to 10 May in Geneva. This “extraordinary” meeting of the parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions was the latest effort to foster synergies between the three Conventions, each of which address different but related aspects of managing toxic chemicals at the global level. Billed by some as the “Super COP”, the meeting of the three Conventions concluded with a mixed bag of outcomes and signals for the future of the global chemicals and waste cluster.

The need for global measures to protect human health and the environment from hazardous chemicals grows more pressing by the day. The Global Chemicals Outlook, prepared by the UN Environment Programme (Unep), forecasts that chemical production, use and disposal will grow by 40-46% in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, during 2012-20. A conservative analysis by the UN shows that chemicals-related health costs will nearly double in sub-Saharan Africa to \$97bn, during the same period. Despite this growth, the global community reaffirmed its commitment at last summer’s Rio+20 conference to ensure that, by 2020, chemicals are managed in such a way that they do not result in significant adverse effects.

## Proposed loophole pulled in face of criticism

The chemicals Super COP was a critical test of this commitment. In the win column, governments added hexabromocyclododecane (HBCD), a toxic flame retardant, to the small but growing list of chemicals regulated under the Stockholm Convention for persistent



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The conference did not reach agreement on the addition of chrysotile asbestos to the Rotterdam Convention

organic pollutants (POPs). Initially limited to 12 toxic, but largely obsolete chemicals, the Convention has steadily expanded over the past six years into a vibrant treaty that now imposes legally binding measures on 23 pollutants, including many

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that are, or were at the time of listing, still in production and use around the world. The EU proposed a loophole that would have allowed products containing HBCD to be recycled, perpetuating exposure from

unidentifiable products for many years, but later withdrew its proposal in the face of strong criticism from civil society groups.

Despite this modest, but important, progress under the Stockholm Convention, outcomes under the other Conventions were less positive. The Basel Convention on the trade of hazardous waste was unable to agree on guidelines for electronic waste (e-waste), despite the growing volume of cell phones, tablets, computers, and televisions discarded annually – and despite images of children and workers exposed to toxic fumes from the burning of e-waste that demonstrate the gravity of the issue and the urgent need for a response.

## Rules blocked by handful of parties

A few parties to the Rotterdam Convention on the “prior informed consent” procedure for trading in hazardous substances remained unable, or unwilling, to accept the overwhelming scientific evidence,

regarding the dangers of two highly hazardous chemicals: asbestos and paraquat. Many countries have gone beyond the “right-to-know” requirements Rotterdam would put in place for these chemicals, having long since banned their use. But, because decisions must be made by consensus under the Rotterdam Convention, a handful of the 152 parties successfully blocked rules that would have required exporters to provide basic health and safety information about these hazardous chemicals to recipients in importing countries.

### Greater transparency

The extent of industry efforts to delay global action was illustrated by the ejection of an industry representative, who claimed to be a diplomat from Guatemala, to prevent the listing of paraquat. Not to be outdone, the pro-asbestos lobby was equally present as part of the Russian delegation that defended the safety of asbestos. Incidents like these demonstrate the need to provide greater transparency, including the live streaming of negotiations via the Internet, so that the public can see at first hand the arguments governments make on their behalf, and can hold them accountable for them.

While the slow progress on asbestos, paraquat and other obvious targets reinforces the need to redouble our efforts to implement existing global agreements, the fact of the matter is that the scope of chemical risks goes far beyond the chemicals or issues addressed by these three Conventions. The 23 POPs now listed under the Stockholm Convention are currently the only hazardous chemicals subject to legally binding obligations throughout their life cycle, due in part to their propensity to disperse around the world through wind and water. Evidence shows, however, that we are persistently exposed to a cocktail of hundreds of dangerous chemicals, that are not necessarily POPs, through their presence in common, everyday products shipped around the world through global trade flows.

### ‘Rising burdens’ of inaction

Individually and in concert, many of these chemicals exert lifelong effects on children who are exposed during critical periods of development. More than a decade ago, the European Commission estimated that as many as 1,400 chemicals could be

classified as of “very high concern”. The majority of these chemicals would not meet the narrow criteria for chemicals of concern under the Stockholm Convention, and thus cannot yet be regulated throughout their full lifecycles. The recently completed UN mercury treaty, which addresses a single element – albeit a pervasive and highly toxic one – further illustrates the global community’s current preference for a piecemeal system of narrowly defined treaties. The pace of action under such a model is irresponsibly slow, given our current knowledge of chemical risks. Moreover, additional expenditures of time, resources and political will will be needed to foster

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“synergies” between international agreements that share implicit common objectives. The Super COP was the latest attempt at such synergies, and the latest evidence that the present system is not rising to the challenge of safe chemicals management. Until we overcome short-sighted and parochial interests to develop stronger, more comprehensive regimes at the national, regional and global levels, the global community and the people it represents will bear the rising burdens of our inaction.

### Safer alternatives

There are promising signs that more

governments are beginning to understand the risks of continued investment in hazardous chemicals. For example, the Chinese government did not oppose the listing of HBCD under the Stockholm Convention, despite its present interest in manufacturing the substance – evidence, perhaps, of a growing recognition that the future of the chemicals industry lies in safer alternatives, not in the status quo cocktail of harmful chemicals.

Improving the capacity of developing countries to implement sound chemicals management at the national level and to limit the cost of inaction as much as possible, would help them maximise the return on foreign aid and technology transfer to improve human health and reduce poverty. The UN voluntary framework known as the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (Saicm) is helping, through pilot projects in Africa and elsewhere, to increase the capacity of countries in the Global South to soundly manage chemicals. However, despite having the broadest mandate of the global agreements for chemicals and waste – to achieve the sound management of chemicals by 2020 – it is the least funded of all global chemicals agreements.

### Essential elements of the global effort

While parties at the Super COP did signal that the synergies effort should continue under the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, they did not clearly indicate that Saicm or the mercury treaty should be part of these efforts. Saicm and the mercury treaty are essential elements of the global effort to effectively address chemical pollution. The synergies process must expand to include them, place greater emphasis on how these agreements can make the most effective and efficient progress to reducing the significant adverse effects of chemicals by 2020, and consider what more will be needed to protect people and the environment from hazardous chemicals beyond that date.

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