



Information Sheet

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The Mercury Convention: A Swiss Idea

As demonstrated by the mercury poisoning of the inhabitants of Minamata (Japan), mercury can be very toxic to humans. The mercury convention, which aims to reduce the risks posed to humans and the environment by the metal, is the product of an idea originated by Switzerland. As part of its activities in this area, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) developed solutions for limiting mercury emissions and releases originating from small-scale gold mining operations, one of the main sources of mercury emissions today.

A total of around 2,000 tonnes of mercury are emitted into the atmosphere annually throughout the world. Artisanal gold mining and coal- and lignite-fired power plants are the main sources of these emissions. The other sources include the production of ferrous and non-ferrous metals and cement plants.

Mercury emissions in Switzerland are low. In 2008, they totalled just over one tonne. Thanks to the strict limit values applied to mercury, batteries, energy-saving light bulbs and fluorescent tubes contain only minute quantities of the metal. Nonetheless, these products must be collected separately and recycled. Today, mercury is rarely used in dental amalgams. Incineration plants and crematoria are also fitted with efficient filters for the recovery of residual mercury.

The tragic example of Minamata

Mercury, a persistent heavy metal, is conveyed by the air and water. Mercury contamination of watercourses and water bodies can have a serious impact as the poison becomes concentrated in the fish located at the end of the aquatic food chain. The city of Minamata in Japan is a tragic example of mercury poisoning. A plastics factory discharged huge quantities of organic compounds containing mercury into the city's bay from the 1930s. The first symptoms of the mercury poisoning were observed 20 years later. Thousands of inhabitants in the surrounding areas suffered headaches, limb pain, paralysis, psychosis and comas, and severe neonatal deformities were also observed. This insidious poisoning, which

was caused by the consumption of mercury-contaminated fish and mussels, claimed the lives of many victims. Many of the survivors were affected by severe after-effects. To pay homage to the victims of this mercury pollution, the new convention is due to be signed in Minamata in 2012 and will be called the Minamata Convention.

The mercury convention: a Swiss idea

The mercury convention arose from a Swiss initiative. Although – apart from a few exceptions – the use of this metal has been banned in Switzerland since 1987, an international regulation on mercury would have the advantage of reducing the risks to human health and the environment in different countries.

Moreover, as an acknowledged centre of expertise in environmental policy and in the field of chemical products and toxic waste, Switzerland is interested in the establishment of such a regulation on mercury. Geneva is already home to the three conventions that apply in these areas: the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants and the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade.

Hence, since 2003, together with Norway, Switzerland has requested the initiation of negotiations in the context of the UNEP for the establishment of a restrictive international agreement on the reduction of mercury emissions and releases throughout the world. Following intensive bilateral negotiations, it succeeded in obtaining the gradual support of the most important countries, in particular the United States and China. In 2009, 147 member states of the UNEP approved the launch of the negotiations. Five sessions of negotiations were planned and should lead to the adoption of the agreement in 2013.

Artisanal gold-mining: former SCD pilot projects awarded Fairtrade and Fairmined certification in Bolivia and Peru

Artisanal gold-mining by small-scale miners is one of the two main sources of mercury emissions. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) became involved in the artisanal gold-mining sector in the early 1990s. Four projects in Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru and currently in Mongolia contributed to the significant improvement of development approaches in this sector over the years. For the implementation of the projects, the SDC set great store by the adoption of an integrated approach that promoted environmentally friendly and health-conserving mining methods and targeted the social integration and economic betterment of the miners and their families. It quickly emerged from these projects that a reduction in harmful mercury emissions could only be achieved through the legally enshrined formalisation of the sector. The SDC's projects in Bolivia, Peru and Mongolia contributed to the establishment of improved legal conditions for the sector. The integration of small-scale mining into the formal economy made it possible for the communities to make significant investments and to comply with social and ecological standards. At the end of 2011 all of the small-scale mining communities in Bolivia and Peru certified as Fairtrade and Fairmined were former SDC pilot projects.

See also http://www.sdc-employment-income.ch/en/Home/News/News_Detail?itemID=10200