

Introduction



Chemicals have become indispensable in many economic activities and are increasingly used in the industrial and agricultural consumer sectors of all societies. However, increasing evidence suggests that chemicals can contribute to health and environmental problems at various stages of their life cycle from production/import through disposal. Such problems include pollution generated during production processes, improper handling, storage, transport accidents, occupational accidents and diseases, as well as environmental contamination due to unsound disposal methods. The majority of such evidence is associated with the use and misuse of pesticides in the agricultural sector, but increasingly industrial and consumer chemicals are reported to cause severe health and environmental problems as countries develop from agricultural to industrial societies.

It is now widely recognized that chemicals need to be managed properly in order to achieve a sustainable level of agricultural and industrial development and a high level of environmental and human health protection. One important step in strengthening national systems for the management of chemicals is a comprehensive assessment of the national infrastructure relating to the legal, institutional, administrative and technical aspects of chemicals management along with an understanding of the nature and extent of chemical availability and use in the country.

In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development - UNCED (Rio-de Janeiro Conference) marked an important event towards the goal of achieving sustainable economic development, which meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. Heads of States or Governments from more than 150 member countries of the United Nations adopted "Agenda 21", a comprehensive document outlining responsibilities of States towards the achievement of sustainable development. The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) monitors implementation of the aims described in Agenda 21.

Chapter 19 of Agenda 21 is entitled "Environmentally Sound Management of Toxic Chemicals including Prevention of Illegal International Traffic in Toxic and Dangerous Products" and it contains objectives for environmentally compatible handling of toxic chemicals including measures for the prevention of the illegal international trade in toxic and dangerous products. An essential part of chapter 19 concerns the coordination of international and regional activities as well as the intensification of international cooperation.

For the purpose of controlling compliance with Chapter 19 and its harmonized implementation, in April 1994 the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) held the Chemical Safety Conference in Stockholm. It was at this conference, which was attended by participants from 130 countries, that the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) was established. The IFCS elaborates recommendations for governments as well as for international and transnational organizations. Also through IFCS countries now regularly discuss their activities and priorities for the sound management of chemicals. The Stockholm conference, also marking the first meeting of the IFCS, adopted "a priorities for action plan to implement the recommendations of chapter 19 of Agenda 21.

As an important element in improving global cooperation in the field of chemicals safety, the IFCS recommends that, as a matter of urgency, the individual states should take stock of the national structures for chemicals management in the form of a so-called "National Profile" (NP). The aim of the National Profile is to provide relevant information on the areas of responsibility and procedures associated with chemical substances as well as to make statements on the effectiveness of the specific rules and regulations. In addition, the National Profiles from the industrialized nations can serve as a model for developing countries and countries undergoing economic change. Together with the IFCS secretariat, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) has published a guidance document in 1955 which, by laying down a structure and providing useful advice on how to proceed, assists in the production of a NP and helps ensure international comparability.

Finally, in response to Stockholm Convention for Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) that entered into force on the 17th of May 2004. Egypt has adopted the convention in May 2001 and joined the convention on the 2nd of May, 2003 after 90 days of the ratification date (13th of January, 2003). Article 7 of the convention invites Parties to develop a National Implementation Plan (NIP) and as stated by step 2 of the project that countries shall prepare National Profiles to assess the national infrastructure for the management of chemicals and to promote Sound Management of Chemicals. This effort is done in close co-operation with the Secretariat of UNIDO Organization.

The NP is intended to record the production, the import and export as well as the use of chemical substances and the treatment of chemical wastes. For example, areas such as industrial chemicals (existing and new chemical substances), plant protection products containing pesticides and fertilizers, pharmaceutical and medical products, dangerous drugs, food as well as cosmetics were envisaged. Relevant regulations and voluntary agreements, the participating authorities and the non-governmental organizations, the areas of competence and the dividing lines separating areas of competence as well as the available stocks of data are to be described in order to ensure that the stocktaking process is as comprehensive as possible.

Publication of the National Chemical Profile for Egypt is expected to have a number of positive effects, like:

- ▶ Increased effectiveness of the work performed by the government/ competent authorities through the provision of clear information on the management of chemicals
- ▶ Initiation or simplification of the information-exchange and dialogue procedures between authorities on the one hand and between authorities and non-governmental organizations on the other;
- ▶ Critical analysis of the procedural channels in order to avoid duplication of work;
- ▶ The provision of more comprehensive information to the general public and to industry

as a result of readily comprehensible description of areas of responsibility;

- ▶ The provision of practical information on ongoing programs and activities in the country which are concerned with the management of chemicals;
- ▶ The establishment of a process which can facilitate the exchange of information and dialogue among government Ministries concerned with the sound management of chemicals, and to assist Ministries in learning from each others experience as a basis for improved cooperation;
- ▶ The strengthening of the national decision-making capabilities related to the management of chemicals;
- ▶ To facilitate the exchange of information and dialogue between government and parties outside of government such as industry, labor and grass-roots organizations, and
- ▶ The establishments of an authoritative document, which can serve as a basis for further efforts to strengthen the national system for the management of chemicals through involvement of all concerned parties.
- ▶ The promotion of communication and exchange of information on the international level.

Further help, comments corrections and additions will be gratefully received.