Government Offices of Sweden

Opinion piece from Ministry of the Environment

The world needs a global deal on chemicals say ministers and vice-ministers from eight countries

Published 13 July 2018

The sound management of chemicals and waste needs to be recognised as an essential part of sustainable development.

Chemicals are everywhere in our daily lives. Since 1950, more than 140 000 new chemicals and pesticides have been synthesized. Chemical substances have contributed greatly to our prosperity. However, many of them are not without risk.

Everyone should be able to feel safe about the toys they give their children, the water they drink and the electronics they use. When products reach the end of their life cycle, the waste must be managed in a way that is sound and sustainable. In other words, we must strive for a non-toxic environment.

A report published by a Lancet Commission shows that pollution, including but not limited to chemicals, is one of the leading causes of death in the world. It is responsible for three times more deaths than AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. The cost of inaction is enormous, and the poor and vulnerable are most affected. Nine out of ten pollution related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries.

Chemicals can also spread through the exchange of goods containing them. Consumers are increasingly buying products online directly from markets in other countries. Trade strengthens our societies, but this development also highlights the need to find new ways of managing the risks associated with chemicals.

The international community has developed conventions on a few substances. However, proactive risk management must clearly be carried out for more than one substance at a time.

The response to the challenges ahead must be a collective political commitment. That is why sound chemical and waste management needs to be recognised as an essential part of sustainable development. The way the world chooses to manage chemicals and waste in the long term will have an impact on human rights, health, climate, water, biodiversity and agriculture. The sound management of chemicals and waste is also a cornerstone in the work for a circular economy.

A global collaboration is in place that we can build upon. The non-binding Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM) provides a policy framework for sound chemical management. SAICM is an important framework. But the current strategy expires in 2020, and the road ahead must therefore be decided.

We are seizing this opportunity to make it clear to policymakers, organisations and businesses globally that the world needs an ambitious global deal on chemicals and waste, just as we needed the Paris Agreement on climate.

Several of our countries gathered together with scientists, business, civil society and intergovernmental organisations in Stockholm on 12 March. We held a high-level dialogue to raise the level of commitment and engagement for a non-toxic environment. Our group is determined to spearhead discussions leading up to, and following, 2020. The next step will be taken at the High-level Political Forum in New York on 17 July.

Looking ahead, there is a need for more transparency concerning chemicals in the supply chain and further emphasis on research. Many companies are already engaged in the search for innovative solutions to replace harmful substances with safe alternatives. These initiatives serve as good examples.

The risks posed by harmful chemicals demand action here and now. If we are to achieve the goals set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, strong global cooperation on chemicals and waste is essential. We are now embarking on a mission to ensure an ambitious global deal is reached, and we urge other actors to join us.

Mr. Marc Chardonnens, Director General of the Federal Office for the Environment, Switzerland
Dr. Edward Chomba, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Water Development, Sanitation and Environmental Protection, Zambia
Mr. Ola Elvestuen, Minister of Climate and Environment, Norway
Ms. Brune Poirson, State Secretary for Ecological Transition, France
Ms. Svenja Schulze, Minister for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Germany
Ms. Karolina Skog, Minister for the Environment, Sweden
Mr. Kimmo Tiilikainen, Minister of the Environment, Energy and Housing, Finland
Ms. Stientje van Veldhoven, State Secretary for Infrastructure and Water Management, The Netherlands

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EU has to step up in fight against plastic waste

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Opinion piece published in Politico on 5 March, by Minister for the Environment Karolina Skog

EU export of plastics is 'indefensible and irresponsible,' says Swedish Environment Minister Karolina Skog.

Every minute, about 15 tons of plastic waste end up in the ocean. The seas, so fundamental to human life, are rapidly being filled with water bottles, abandoned fishing gear and plastic toys that we have cleared from our homes.

Sweden and many other countries have developed policies aimed at combating problems related to plastic. In our country, we have banned the use of microplastics in rinse-off cosmetics and initiated a government commission on plastics, among other things.

Yet much more needs to be done on national, regional and global levels. In important respects, the different levels are interlinked. We know that much of the plastic waste that is exported from EU member countries ends up in third countries that lack the infrastructure to deal with it sustainably. This export is indefensible and irresponsible.

Owing partly to the lack of national and regional infrastructure for recycling, people in my own country are starting to question whether the waste they carefully sort into their bins is put to good use. For most materials, the answer is yes. But when it comes to plastic, much more must be done.

The use of toxic chemicals and an ever-growing number of different plastics make the material difficult to recycle. A recent report by Material

Economics concludes that around €1 billion worth of plastic reaches its end of life every year in Sweden. Some of this is recycled, some is burned for energy. But only 13 percent of its value is captured. We need to focus on reuse and better recycling, and creating a higher capacity for recycling within the Union is part of the solution.

The European Commission's new Plastics Strategy is a step in the right direction, but many of the policies lack ambition.

More forceful action is needed to ensure that EU countries do not export plastic waste to countries that cannot guarantee waste management that is sustainable for human health and the environment. Since China has put into place strict limits on imports of foreign waste, the EU must now pay very close attention to the shift of waste streams.

Brussels should also take joint action to develop the Basel Convention to regulate the transport of plastic waste.

The Commission's upcoming legislative proposal to limit the amount of single-use plastic and reduce the amount of lost fishing gear is a positive development. When cleaning European beaches, single-use plastic makes up more than 50 percent of the marine litter. We must ensure that recycled plastic is of a high standard and that recycling occurs in a way that is sustainable for human health and the environment.

We must ensure that recycled plastic is of a high standard and that recycling occurs in a way that is sustainable for human health and the environment. It is surprising that Commission strategy does not mention the importance of non-toxic material cycles. For manufacturers of goods and products, it is important to know that requirements are consistent for recycled as well as for virgin materials. This is particularly important with plastics, which we know can contain many substances of high concern. We want to see stricter requirements in relevant product legislation.

Some years ago, plastic was just a material, albeit a very useful one. Today, we know more.

Plastic has an impact on the status of our oceans, the health of our children and efficiency of our economies. With this knowledge in hand, we must be ambitious and accept our responsibility not only for what we produce and use, but also for what we choose to export.

The European Strategy for Plastics lays out a way forward. Now the Commission, the European Parliament and the member states must all push for more sustainable plastic action.

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For Fiji's sake, Cut the Carbons

Published 20 November 2017

Opinion piece published in PACNEWS 16 November, by Karolina Skog, Sweden's Minister of Environment, Erik Solheim, Executive Director, UN Environment and Dr Marcelo Mena-Carrasco is Minister of the Environment for Chile.

As Fijian-chaired climate talks continue this week in Bonn, Germany, millions of households across the northern hemisphere are observing another annual event: the first lighting for the season of the home woodstove or boiler.

Tropical Fiji, one of the countries most threatened by sea-level rise from climate change, may seem to have little to do with woodstoves. But in reality, the simple, ancient human action of lighting a fire and the fate of the islands and other nations like it are deeply intertwined.

The problem is the release of black carbon from inefficient burning of woodstoves, as well as emissions of CO2, methane, and other ozone precursors and climate pollutants. These emissions are especially strong in regions near the Arctic, such as Sweden, Norway and Germany, or in other countries bracing for snow and ice, such as Chile with its high Andes. All these pollutants warm the climate, but black carbon has an impact multiplied many times. This is especially the case when it settles on snow and ice, darkening it and speeding up melting.

Even small amounts of black carbon have been shown to increase melting exponentially, as Dr. Heidi Sevestre, an Arctic glaciologist at the climate talks noted. "We have seen that snow and ice, contaminated by black carbon levels nearly invisible to the eye, still melt much more rapidly."

And it can travel far: black carbon from woodstoves in North America has

been traced to northern Canada and Greenland; and from northern Europe to the Arctic Ocean as far as the North Pole. The faster melting of glaciers and especially, the great ice sheets of Greenland and Antarctica translate to faster and higher sea-level rise on Fiji and other low-lying nations such as Bangladesh.

Closer to home however, wood-burning has a more immediate effect on health of the immediate household as well as those living nearby. Last winter's extreme smog events in Paris, London, Santiago and Warsaw came in large part due to household wood, or, in the case of Poland, coal stoves.

Worldwide, the WHO estimates that over 4 million people die prematurely each year from illness attributable to air pollution from heating or cooking with solid fuels, including more than 50% of premature deaths from pneumonia among children under 5.

This is because the very small particles produced by inefficient burning penetrate deep into human lungs. Other diseases associated with such exposure among older populations include stroke, heart disease, and lung cancer. Poorly burning fires also lead to greater deposits of soot and creosote in the chimney, vastly increasing fire hazards.

Modern woodstoves, especially cutting-edge technologies such as pellet or reverse combustion stoves, have been measured in a recent Climate and Clean Air Coalition (CCAC) project to have very low emissions of traditional air and climate pollutants, including black carbon. If the wood fuel comes from sustainable sources, these technologies can form an important part of the transition away from fossil fuels, especially for households far from traditional energy grids. Support and subsidies, such as a current stove change-out programme in Chile will help speed such developments.

In the meantime, however, not everyone can afford a new stove; and for these households there is a surprisingly simple solution that will even save money: lighting and burning woodstoves the right way.

"Burn Right", a campaign being launched this week in Sweden and just wrapping up for the heating season in Chile, along with a global online campaign by the CCAC, involves following just a few simple steps. By lighting the fire from the top (or "flipping the fire upside down," to take advantage of natural drafts), burning properly dried fuel, and in the right amounts, woodstove users can get better heat output with far less fuel and

harmful emissions – by some estimates and depending on the household's starting point, cutting emissions and fuel use in half. Sevestre, who grew up in the Alps in a house heated by wood recently taught her own father this method. "Small changes in our wood burning habits will go a long way for the glaciers and sea ice," she says.

These techniques, including a demonstration video are outlined on the CCAC web page www.burnright.org in English, Spanish, German, French and Russian; and in Swedish on the web page www.naturvardsverket.se/vedeldning.

Smoke from poorly burning wood stoves both damages human health, and contributes to a warming climate, especially in the Arctic and other snow and ice regions. But by taking responsibility for how we use this resource, everyday people can contribute to an immediate and positive change for health and the climate alike. All it takes is learning a slightly new take on this ancient human activity. Your neighbors, and Fiji will thank you.

Karolina Skog, Sweden's Minister of Environment

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Dr Marcelo Mena-Carrasco is Minister of the Environment for Chile.