



BASEL / ROTTERDAM / STOCKHOLM
CONVENTIONS

SUCCESS STORY #8

HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTED THROUGH THE BASEL,
ROTTERDAM AND STOCKHOLM CONVENTIONS

**Working closely with partners on the ground to combat
harm caused by hazardous chemicals and wastes**

In recent years, boosted by the climate emergency and the response of countries to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the world has increasingly realised that freedom from hazardous chemicals and wastes not only protects human health and the natural environment, but should also be considered as part of our inalienable human rights, such as those to life, health, clean water and sanitation. The unprecedented global crisis of COVID-19 has further exacerbated the threats to these rights. This unique situation has commanded more effective protective measures, in particular towards the most vulnerable, including the elderly, women, children and health workers.

People around the world are exposed to hundreds of toxic and hazardous substances linked to various forms of cancer, reproductive abnormalities, lung diseases, diabetes and

learning disabilities, among other adverse health impacts. As so often though, it is those who would benefit most from the observance and protection of their human rights, that suffer the most. Amongst the most vulnerable ones, these include indigenous people, exposed workers (such as firefighters, miners, farmers and so on) and, arguably the most at risk, children. Paediatricians sadly describe a number of children as born pre-polluted, resulting in a «silent pandemic» of diseases, disabilities and premature death around the world.

The World Health Organization's Atlas on Children's Health and the Environment (2017) detailed that 1.7 million children under five years old die each year due to a polluted environment and of those, that 570,000 deaths occur because of air pollution. Furthermore, electronic and electrical waste as well as plastic waste have fast become emerging environmental threats not

only to children and other vulnerable groups of the society but to all of us, and harmful chemicals that work themselves through the food chain, air, water, soil are also contributing to this alarming situation.

A common denominator among many cases of human rights infringements involves the exposure of communities, workers and consumers to toxic substances, whether from extractive industries, pesticide use in agriculture, industrial chemicals in manufacturing, emissions from power plants, factories, vehicles, and other sources—and of course the improper disposal of hazardous wastes. The challenge is so comprehensive that as long ago as 2012, the UN appointed an independent expert, a “Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment” to monitor and help alleviate this desperate global situation. Prior to this, in 1995, the Commission on Human Rights established a mandate more specific to the BRS Conventions, in order to examine the human rights implications of exposure to hazardous substances and toxic waste. In 2011 this was expanded to include the whole life-cycle of hazardous products from manufacturing to final disposal (often known as the ‘cradle-to-grave’ approach), with the United Nations’ Human Rights Council affirming that hazardous substances and waste constitute a serious threat to the full enjoyment of human rights.

The importance of the BRS Conventions is that it lies at the critical junction between those - such as the UN Special Rapporteurs - who have a global, top-down view of the international challenge, and governments and grassroots organisations that are tackling individual areas of concern, including contamination from industrial operations, as well as the long-range transport of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) into vulnerable regions such as the Arctic.

Abandoned industrial sites often leave a legacy of hazardous chemicals and wastes that includes massive fuel spills, solvents, pesticides, PCB, other POPs and heavy metals that continue to harm the health of people today and threaten future generations.

While the global transport of PCBs and other POPs into the Arctic is a significant source of exposure, research also demonstrates that people associated with this region have even higher-than-average levels of PCB and other POPs in their bodies. This is scientifically attributable to the contamination by these installations. The following disease patterns were observed from approximately 700 community health surveys and from interviews with health aides and elders:

- Cancers
- Thyroid disease
- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Low birth weight babies, premature births, still births, miscarriages
- Other reproductive health problems
- Learning and developmental disabilities

Implementing the BRS Conventions is crucial, as it significantly contributes in improving - saving even - the lives of countless human beings, in particular the most vulnerable, and hence the enjoyment of their fundamental human rights to life, health, and so on. This has to be undertaken in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders, notably the United Nations’ Special Rapporteurs, in their very different but equally vital work in protecting against the harmful effects of hazardous chemicals and wastes. It is only by engaging cooperation among all stakeholders, at both international and national levels, including with those active on the ground, whether non-governmental or governmental, businesses or non-profit entities, that such actions can have any impact and that real positive change can be secured for all of us.



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Food and Agriculture
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