

African Regional Conferences, Nairobi, 22-26 May 2017 - Blog

EEB/ZMWG (“Zero Mercury”) recently hosted a series of mercury reduction conferences from the 23rd to 25th of May 2017 in Nairobi, Kenya, in collaboration with UN Environment. The purpose of the conferences was to share information about, and experiences with, reducing mercury use in artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) and phasing out mercury-added products.

A total of 71 representatives from different Environment and Mining ministries, UN Environment, UNIDO, UNITAR, UNDP and special agencies, intergovernmental organisations, NGOs, as well as academics, private sector representatives and consultants from 30 African countries, Jamaica and China, took part in the workshops.

The workshop focused on the need for governments to plan for implementation of the Minamata Convention (“the Convention”), which will enter into force in mid-August 2017. The Convention contains mandatory obligations to eliminate where feasible, and otherwise minimize, the global supply, use and trade of mercury, as well as to reduce its emissions and releases to the environment.

The first day and a half workshop focused on ASGM, and specifically on the development of National Action Plans for reducing mercury use in ASGM, a mandatory requirement of the Convention. The discussions emphasized the challenges of formalization and technical approaches to reducing mercury use in ASGM. The experiences from our work in Tanzania and Ghana were also presented. Because ASGM accounts for the biggest source release of mercury to the African environment, the workshop focused on the need for regional cooperation to simultaneously reduce supply of available mercury and demand for its use in the ASGM sector, while promoting cleaner production. This workshop was preceded by a UN Environment – Global Mercury Partnership training session on developing baseline estimates for the ASGM sector through a National Action Plan (NAP).

The next day and a half focused on the phase out of mercury-added products and outlined the need for country-specific laws and strategies to complete these phase outs by 2020, as required by the Convention. Case studies from Nigeria and Mauritius were presented, focusing on steps for phasing out products that can be taken not only by governments but also NGOs, UN

agencies and other stakeholders. Phasing out mercury-added products is also a priority area for the region, since Africa is a net importer of mercury-added products that become environmental pollutant at the end of their life.

These two EEB/ZMWG workshops were followed, on May 26th, by an awareness raising and knowledge sharing meeting of the UN Environment Global Mercury Product Partnership for the African region. This one-day forum assisted government officials to develop their own draft country road maps for phasing out mercury in products, by using the checklist developed by the Zero Mercury. It further provided country case study examples towards successfully phasing out mercury added products. In a key development, during this meeting, representatives of the Chinese manufacturing sector presented their plans for shifting to mercury-free products in the health care sector.

The active and enthusiastic participation of representatives of the African Region in these workshops demonstrated that the region has clearly committed to reducing mercury as a priority issue, with a focus on reducing mercury use in products and ASGM, its two largest uses. That enthusiasm is consistent with their efforts taken during the treaty negotiations, when the African Region took the lead in offering the strongest text to phase out mercury-added products, including dental amalgam, and raising concerns about exposure risks from ASGM. It is notable that, of the 55 countries having ratified the Minamata Convention to date, Africa is ahead of every other continent with 20 country ratifications including Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Chad, Djibouti, Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Togo and Zambia. Thus, Africa continues to demonstrate its leadership in addressing the global mercury crisis.

This series of workshops was the culmination of a 3 year (July 2014-December 2017) Zero Mercury Working Group project, funded by the European Commission via the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) under the programme on Capacity Building Related to Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, phase 2 (ACP/MEAs2). Complementary funds were provided by UN Environment Global Mercury Partnership and the US EPA.

Africa Drives Global Action Against Mercury Use, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2017/05/africa-drives-global-action-against-mercury-use/>