Information Exchange for Sound Chemicals Management

GUIDANCE NOTE

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Introduction

The purpose of this note is to suggest a process and key questions[1] to assist in the development of a Charter (the key deliverable – referred to in the *Implementation Manual for Project Countries* as "Terms of Reference") to strengthen information exchange for sound chemicals management. The work of the Task Force is expected to take place over the next year.

The suggested information exchange goal is to facilitate access to information needed by various institutional actors and user groups for development of legal, technical, individual and institutional capacities for controlling and reducing chemicals risks and for the promotion of sound chemicals management and safety practices. In other words, to ensure that the people involved in the numerous aspects of national chemicals management and safety get the information they need at the right time, at the right place and in a form which is suitable to their needs. Development and broad endorsement of a Charter for information exchange based on the principles of sound planning that are outlined in other UNITAR/IOMC guidance is the suggested way forward to assist in such efforts.

Undertaking a situation analysis can be the first step, followed by an examination and endorsement of the suggested goal – as expressed in the Charter. Next steps that can assist with planning include: considering options for information exchange; identifying resource requirements; and ensuring support from decision-makers. All of these steps can assist in determining the *content* of a draft Charter.

Situation Analysis

The National Chemicals Management Profile will have identified the major institutions involved in one or more aspects of chemicals management and may have identified information needs for chemicals management at the national level, and can therefore provide a good start for the Situation Analysis. The aim of the Situation Analysis is to develop a complete (as possible) and detailed map of the specific information needs for various actors and existing infrastructure. For example, the information needs in the case of accidents, poisonings or other emergencies are different than those needed by a regulator who is responsible for assessing the environmental health risk of the use of a chemical or the risks faced by a worker in a factory. It may be useful to categorise information according to the major stakeholders and other identifiable groups who need to have access to information on chemicals, such as: workers (including farm workers); consumers (general public); emergency response personnel (including hospitals); regulators (including import/export controls, plant approvals, etc.); and policy-makers.

The Situation Analysis can be developed into a report which outlines the needs of the various actors, the existing infrastructure, and its limitations in addressing the identified needs and priorities.

Examining the Suggested Goal and Objectives

As stated above, the suggested information exchange goal is to facilitate access to the information needed by various institutional actors and user groups. A key deliverable in this effort for Task Force is, within one year, to develop (and obtain high-level endorsement of) a Charter to strengthen information exchange for sound chemicals management.

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[1] See Annex A for key questions for the Situation Analysis and subsequent planning-related steps.

Based on identified information needs[2] and taking into account the specific circumstances in the country (e.g. the existing information exchange infrastructure and the capacities of the various actors and user groups), establishing a clear set of objectives is a crucial starting point. The following are some possible objectives that can assist with effective information exchange:

- strengthening how the information needs of users are met, in both the public and private sectors, at the local, provincial, and national levels;

- facilitating the collection, management, access, use and dissemination of information/data for chemicals management and decision-making;

- providing information in support of sound, informed policy and decision-making in a timely manner;

- strengthening the national capacity to collect and use multi-sectoral information provided through international sources;

- strengthening local capacity to meet the information-related obligations and requirements of multi-lateral agreements; and

- contributing towards an integrated approach to national chemicals management.

The Task Force may identify other objectives that can assist in information exchange efforts.

Considering Options for Information Exchange

Taking into account the existing situation and stated objectives, the Task Force, as a next step, can identify some possible options. Some possible (in some cases, mutually supportive) options for information exchange include:

- national inventory of information (e.g. an index, searchable web pages);
- web pages on the Internet[3] with links to sources listed in the national inventory;
- newsletters (both hardcopy and electronic) providing updates on information sources or new documents of interest to the network;
- nodal focal points for information on chemicals (e.g. designated individuals for ensuring effective information exchange);
- agreements for exchange between institutions; and
- shared catalogue of resources (e.g. database).

Additional items that can assist with determining which options the Task Force and decision-makers might wish to consider include:

- What level of formality should information exchange activities have (e.g. should there be a secretariat?)?
- What kinds of information are of the highest priority to be exchanged?
- Who will be involved?
- Will the focus be internal?
- Will information exchange activities have a public component?

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[2] Annex B outlines some types of information which may be of value to exchange.

[3] See Annex C for additional information on the potential role of the Internet for information exchange.

- Will the strengthening/implementation of information exchange proceed in stages?
- What resources will be needed?

Resource Requirements

Estimating resource requirements is an essential step in the planning process. Resource requirements can play a large role in informing the work of the Task Force, and will help to shape preferred options/recommendations. Questions that can assist in these efforts include:

- What funding and other resources will be needed for each of the various proposed options to operate effectively?
- What entity might provide the secretariat (if deemed appropriate)?
- Where might such resources be obtained?

Ensuring Support from Decision-makers

It is important to present the deliberations of the Task Force to the appropriate decision-makers for consideration and potential adoption/implementation. A brief paper can be prepared and circulated outlining the findings and recommendations of the Task Force (the options can be outlined, and the preferred option(s) highlighted), including a draft of the Charter for information exchange. Once key issues (as discussed above) have been satisfactorily addressed and reflected in the Charter accordingly, it can be formally endorsed by decision-makers.

Key Questions for the Situation Analysis

The following suggested guidance questions can assist in determining the details of the situation analysis and subsequent steps:

Users of information

- Who are the (current and potential) users of information in the country?
- What are their potential needs?

Characteristics of information (and information exchange activities)

- What types of activities are generating information?
- What type of information is typically used/needed for chemicals management?

Sources of information

- What are key national sources of information for chemicals management?
- What are international sources of relevant information/data?

Information exchange mechanisms

- What types of mechanisms exist for information exchange within ministries/ departments?
- What information is shared across the different agencies (including and excluding nongovernmental bodies) charged with chemicals management?
- What types of mechanisms exist for sharing such information?
- What types of mechanisms exist for sharing information with the general public?

Key Planning-Related Questions

Evaluating importance and usefulness of information

- Is the information new (or an addition to current information) or previously unknown to those responsible for chemicals management?
- Might the information be of interest or use to others (e.g. other ministries or those outside government)?
- Does the information need interpretation? Is it easily understood and communicated?
- Is the information confidential?

Opportunities

- Are there models for information exchange that exist (e.g. regarding non-chemicals-related information, within particular ministries) from which lessons could be learned?

Roles and responsibilities and decisions for different actors

- Will responsibility for monitoring the effectiveness of information exchange be shared and/or lie with a lead agency?
- Would the formation of an information exchange secretariat be a useful step?
- How formal (or informal) should information exchange be?

Ensuring support from decision-makers

- What are the views of all concerned ministries and other key actors?
- Which of the options are most likely to receive broad support?
- What are the preferred options?

Annex B

Examples of Types of Information which may be of Value to Exchange

- factory licensing records;
- monitoring data (e.g. levels of chemicals in the air, water, soil, food);
- research data on chemicals;
- pesticide registration data; and
- import, export, manufacturing statistics;
- industrial emissions (estimations and data) and other monitoring data;
- trade in chemicals (including import and export);
- sales data (e.g. pesticides sold in stores or wholesale to farmers);
- international and national data on toxicology including human health and environmental effects;
- public information including pamphlets, brochures, posters;
- training/capacity building activities (e.g. hazard communication) including manuals, guidance materials;
- briefing materials;
- reports, peer reviewed and "grey" (non-peer reviewed) literature;
- proceedings of meetings on chemicals management;
- emergency response data; and
- inventories of stockpiled, unused, undistributed, stored chemicals.

Annex C

The Role of the Internet for Information Exchange

The Internet can act as an important tool to facilitate the exchange of information. The following issues, outlined below, can provide useful topics for consideration by countries.

- Information exchange applications should be web-complaint (e.g. Word files, Excel files, graphics). Most computer software is already suitable for Internet publishing.
- Information on the Internet can be easily updated and reformatted to suit changing needs of the users and providers.
- The Internet is relatively inexpensive to access. It is often cheaper than internal communication systems (e.g. a local area network (LAN) – a network of linked computers – which is easy to establish in one building, but often difficult for ministries in different buildings to access).
- Assistance for Internet access and provision of computer hardware and software are of high priority to many bilateral and multilateral donors.
- Often the Internet is the only practical way for developing countries to have an effective physical information exchange network.

Internet access is by nature a public system and therefore it is possible that the system can be breached. Software programmes exist, however, that can provide an acceptable level of security.

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