

# The Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management in Cambodia – barriers and opportunities

## Introduction

Over the past 20 years a cluster of international environmental agreements has developed aimed at reducing the risks associated with the production and use of chemicals. The Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM), launched in 2006, is one of the newest additions to this group, and responds to the global goal of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg to use and produce chemicals in a way that minimizes their adverse effects on health and the environment by 2020 (known as the 2020 goal). SAICM differs from other chemical and waste agreements on several key points: it is a non-binding agreement, its activities are broad in scope (almost 300 actions are listed in the Global Plan of Action), and it allows non-governmental stakeholders to participate in its main decision-making body (the International Conference on Chemicals Management, ICCM). SAICM also seeks to reduce the gap between developed and developing countries in managing the risks that chemicals present to people and ecosystems. This policy brief summarizes the results and policy implications of a research project that examined early implementation of SAICM in Cambodia. The results are based on a national-level case study, involving interviews with Cambodian and international stakeholders engaged in the SAICM process, and observations made at the ICCM 3 in Nairobi in September 2012.

## Key findings

- It is now timely to review progress on the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management (SAICM). The SAICM is an international agreement and was launched in 2006, and its early implementation at the national level in Cambodia has led to concrete results: new overarching legislation on chemicals management is on its way, national policy coordination has been improved, and there is a new vision of what chemicals management at the national level could become.
- However, barriers to effective implementation remain. In Cambodia, these include a lack of capacity on the ground to enforce legislation, and a lack of long-term funding for chemicals management. Furthermore, ministries in charge of implementing the approach lack a strong mandate and sufficient capacity.
- Successful regional collaboration on SAICM, as well as the momentum created by an international agreement, can help to convince the government, the private sector, and other stakeholders to make chemicals management a higher priority.
- Key SAICM design features – such as its voluntary status, multi-stakeholder participation and a broad range of actions – have a mostly positive impact on implementation in a developing country context.
- At the heart of the SAICM is the goal of ensuring that, “by the year 2020, chemicals are produced and used in ways that minimize significant adverse impacts on the environment and human health.” However, because the SAICM does not define this goal in operational terms, there is no yardstick against which countries can measure their performance.
- The twenty indicators for monitoring SAICM implementation are currently inadequate for measuring progress towards the 2020 goal.



Domestic chemicals on sale in a market in Cambodia

## SAICM: Barriers and opportunities in Cambodia

The study showed that SAICM had generated a clear momentum in Cambodia: since its introduction several projects on chemicals have been completed with tangible results. The outputs with the strongest causal link to SAICM are a new draft law on chemicals, together with projects directly supported by the Quick Start Programme (QSP) under SAICM. Interviews also suggest that implementation of the SAICM has reinforced mechanisms for coordination, such as inter-ministerial committees and a technical working group on chemicals management. Cambodian stakeholders stressed how important the approach has been in opening the door to an overall, preventive system of chemicals management. Stakeholders also suggested that SAICM’s most important contribution is that it provides a vision of what chemicals management could look like. From this point of view, the long-term cognitive contributions of the SAICM might be among its most important effects. It is also pos-

**Table 1: Barriers to and opportunities for implementing the SAICM in Cambodia**

Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There are illegal imports of chemicals and other non-compliance issues. A new legal framework for chemicals alone cannot solve these problems. Strengthened enforcement would be a positive contribution.</li><li>• Ministries lack a mandate and the capacity to enforce existing rules.</li><li>• The Ministry of Environment is weak compared to other ministries.</li><li>• The division of responsibility for chemicals management between ministries is unclear.</li><li>• Industry stakeholders are not sufficiently interested or involved.</li><li>• Long-term financing solutions for national chemicals management are currently inadequate.</li></ul>
Opportunities/success factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Policy-makers and government ministries are increasingly interested in chemicals management.</li><li>• Ministries and other stakeholders are collaborating to a greater extent, through the inter-ministerial committees and the technical working group on chemicals management.</li><li>• Regional collaboration under SAICM has supported countries in Southeast Asia in strengthening national chemicals management.</li><li>• International environmental agreements can support cooperation with the private sector, because an internationally accepted framework can give more weight to an issue, encouraging greater participation.</li><li>• Funding under the SAICM through the Quick Start Programme (QSP) helped to initiate implementation, and funded projects have produced results from relatively small funding.</li><li>• The success of the QSP-funded projects could be linked to the terms of its grants: QSP funding was only granted if projects were well prepared, as opposed to cases where all eligible countries are offered a given amount of funding to prepare national implementation plans (e.g. under the Stockholm Convention).</li><li>• Leadership and championing has helped to advance the SAICM at the national level.</li></ul>

sible that it contributed to other results, such as Cambodia's new law on pesticides and fertilizers and the ratification of the Rotterdam Convention.

Table 1 lists barriers to and opportunities for implementing the SAICM at the national level, as identified by various stakeholders interviewed.

The key problem with implementing and enforcing the SAICM in Cambodia appears to be the lack of basic capacity on the ground. Without such capacity the level of ambition or comprehensiveness of new legislation and new international frameworks do not matter. Rather than building the base of the pyramid (by, for example, increasing the number and expertise of inspectors) funding and development assistance have generally focused on time-limited projects, policy development, or one-off investments in technical equipment. Research on successful capacity building in developing countries has shown that it generally takes place through sustained multi-year commitments. Thus, it remains a challenge for the SAICM to "trickle down" and fundamentally alter practices at the local level.

On the other hand, developed country partners in the SAICM have expressed the view that developing countries must themselves build this kind of basic capacity, which should be based on domestic priorities and a long-term commitment. This view has, among other factors, led to reluctance among donor countries to contribute to a more long-term financial mechanism under SAICM. Furthermore, the SAICM Secretariat is currently not in a position to provide special technical assistance to individual countries for implementation.

Weak environment ministries and a lack of effective inter-ministerial coordination is a common problem in environmental policy. Research suggests that top-level government needs to show clear political leadership on an issue if environment ministries are to convince other ministries of its importance, and that tackling it can support other policy objectives (e.g. economic competitiveness, public health and provision of ecosystem services). By the same token, clear signals from government are also likely to be critical in encouraging industry stakeholders to prioritize sound chemicals management.

The interviews carried out in the case study suggest that the leadership of the Cambodian Ministry of Environment, and in particular how the Secretary of State H.E. Kieu Muth has championed chemicals management over the long-term, has been key to the successes in implementation that have so far been achieved. Another important factor was the regional collaboration stimulated and supported by SAICM. Furthermore, the design of the QSP funding program also encouraged well-prepared and cost-effective projects.

Our research also suggests that an international policy framework can play a key role as a reference point in dialogues with the private sector. That is to say, the case for proactive, sound management of chemicals is easier to make if there are more countries and non-governmental partners behind it.

The study also looked at the effects of early implementation of SAICM in Cambodia, in light of the key design features of the regime. Interviewees considered the *broad scope* of SAICM to be a positive design feature, because it allows





© Juliette Williams / EIF

**Cambodian farmer using pesticides**

greater flexibility when setting priorities at the national level, thereby enhancing national ownership of the process.

The *multi-stakeholder* participation in SAICM at the international level is unprecedented, and was seen as positive by all interviewees. This design feature may help to resolve certain differences of position between governments and the private sector at the international level (e.g. in the ICCM) rather than in the national arena, where it may be more challenging to mediate between interests.

All interviewees expressed that the *voluntary status* of the SAICM has been a positive feature in terms of its effectiveness, and it is this voluntary status that has made possible the broad scope of the SAICM as well as multi-stakeholder involvement. Thus, the interviews point to the conclusion that these three SAICM design features – broad scope, multi-stakeholder participation, and voluntary status – were seen as fit for the purpose of improving chemicals management in a developing country such as Cambodia, in line with the 2020 goal.

### **SAICM at the global level**

What progress has been made implementing the SAICM at the global level? Implementation was first reviewed at ICCM 3 in September 2012. By that date, countries and non-governmental participants had reported on the 20 indicators developed by the ICCM, and the Secretariat presented a chemicals management baseline and first progress review. However, both the indicators themselves and the way in which the results were discussed at the conference were an insufficient basis for assessing progress towards the 2020 goal.

Firstly, under the category of risk reduction there are, for example, indicators on whether there is a mechanism in place for setting priorities for risk reduction, and whether there is a website for stakeholders with information about chemical risks. However, indicators of this kind have limited value for assessing progress on actual risk reduction at the local level, because assessments depend on how such mechanisms are

used in practice, and not on whether they simply exist. Like Cambodia, many countries have established national implementation plans and conducted priority-setting exercises that will be captured by the SAICM indicator system; however, the continued implementation and enforcement of those plans will not. Furthermore, the Secretariat's summary report of indicators also tended to have a quantitative focus, as opposed to assessing the quality of reported actions, and the results were not linked to the 2020 goal. In addition to the limitations of the indicators themselves, it should be noted that the overall rate of response among all governmental participants to the indicator questionnaire was only 40%, and 20% for the Asia-Pacific region.

Secondly, discussions at ICCM-3 did not critically evaluate either the progress towards the 2020 goal or the interpretation of indicator reporting. Much of the discussion focused on reporting modalities and how the system should be developed for the future, rather than asking more fundamental questions about whether the SAICM is indeed fit for its purpose, whether sufficient progress had been made, and what more profound lessons might be drawn regarding its content and overall work process. The agenda item on implementation did not lead to any decisions on revision of the SAICM itself, only on reporting modalities. Although progress on implementation was also discussed in side events and high-level panels at ICCM-3, there seemed to be a near consensus that progress was satisfactory and, implicitly, that the relevant comparison was with the baseline, not the 2020 goal. Parts of the NGO community were more critical, arguing that progress was insufficient and too slow, and that a more concrete roadmap towards the 2020 goal is needed with a delimited set of specific priorities (e.g. greater political commitment, increased industry responsibility, adequate finance, and regional implementation plans). Thus, there is currently a lack of data with which to conclusively assess progress towards the 2020 goal at the global level.

The 2020 goal represents the fundamental problem definition underlying the SAICM, and there is a need to unpack it in order to establish how to increase the effectiveness of the regime, including the fit between the problem and institutional design. There coexist two interpretations of the goal, and what it implies for international cooperation: it is seen as either 1) a vague goal that first and foremost implies the need for a broad program to deal with multiple adverse effects and corresponding management needs, backed up by a broad coalition of actors, or 2) a goal that requires that the most signifi-



© Beiter-Factory Cambodia

**Cambodia: hazardous chemicals in use in a factory**

## Policy considerations

### International:

- The follow-up and reporting system under SAICM, with its 20 key indicators, needs to better assess how effectively the regime tackles inadequate chemicals management. This requires an operationalized definition of the 2020 goal as well as defined strategies to implement it.
- The ICCM may consider giving more weight to existing implementation challenges, rather than investing more time and resources in broadening the scope of the SAICM with additional emerging issues and action points.
- Although capacity for continuous and effective enforcement needs to be based on domestic resources from core government budgets, additional support from donor countries and international institutions would provide an important signal that the chemicals issue is a high priority. However, given the rapid expansion and profitability of the chemicals industry worldwide, it is also urgent to consider innovative means of funding from the private sector and/or cost recovery schemes for governments.
- It may be useful to carefully consider and balance the benefits of the SAICM's broad scope, stakeholder involvement, and voluntary status with the need for more specific and measurable targets for effective implementation on the ground, both for the future development of SAICM as well as for future international agreements.

### Cambodia:

- Efforts to improve chemicals management in Cambodia should be better integrated into overarching government policies, plans and programs in order to ensure that the chemicals challenge is given higher priority.
- Coordination between ministries and other stakeholders needs to be further improved. In particular, this should include a clearer definition of roles and division of responsibilities.
- Greater stakeholder involvement would accelerate progress towards sound chemicals management, and needs to be further strengthened, through, for example, more public consultations on proposals to regulate chemicals.

cant and high-priority risks are specified, and addressed by a more concrete and sharp agenda for action. The two different interpretations give rise to differing views on the progress of SAICM, and may also point in somewhat different directions as regards its future development.

### Lessons from early implementation of SAICM

Are there lessons to be learned from the early stages of SAICM implementation for developing new regimes? Studies on regime effectiveness tell us that this depends not only on regime design, but also on a regime's fit with the problem at hand. This reduces the potential to draw general conclusions

This policy brief is authored by Linn Persson, Åsa Persson and Chanthy Sam. It is based on research carried out with the support of the Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency (Sida), and on the paper Persson, Linn, Åsa Persson, and Chanthy Sam 2014 "Implementation of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management in Cambodia: Effects of Regime Design." *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics*, April. doi:10.1007/s10784-014-9254-5.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all interviewees who kindly gave their time to share their views, and to the Cambodian NGO Forum for their collaboration on the project.

from this case study for the benefit of future international environmental agreements. However, there are some points that are worth noting. These are listed above together with policy considerations that are primarily directed towards the ICCM and the broader SAICM community.

#### Published by:

Stockholm Environment Institute  
Linnégatan 87D, Box 24218  
104 51 Stockholm  
Sweden  
Tel: +46 8 30 80 44

**Author contact:** Linn Persson,  
linn.persson@sei-international.org

**Media contact:** Tom Gill  
tom.gill@sei-international.org

**sei-international.org**  
2014

**Twitter:** @SEIresearch, @SEIclimate