

The Other Global Health Crisis: Highly Hazardous Pesticides

Monica Piccinini reports on attempts to ban the export of dangerous chemicals, subverted by agrichemical businesses in the US and UK

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COVID-19 isn't the only global health crisis occurring right now. There is another crisis, propagated by a global industry, that is entirely man made.

The world's five largest agrochemical companies: Bayer, BASF, Sygenta, Corteva and FMC – members of Croplife International lobby group – are making huge profits by selling chemicals that pose a serious risk to human health.

Research has shown links to increased cancer, liver disease, DNA damage, reproductive failure, endocrine disruption and also to the environment like groundwater contamination, microbiome disruption, poisoning of birds, mammals, fish and bees.

The main markets for these dangerous chemicals are low and middle-income countries, like Brazil and India. Although in European markets some of these products have already been banned, European companies can still produce and sell them to regions with lesser regulations.

Why are these companies allowed to sell such harmful chemicals already banned in the EU to countries that are known to have weaker regulations?

Highly Hazardous Pesticides

“Even though the climate is different, our bodies are made from the same matter”, [explains](#) spokesperson for the Permanent Campaign Against Pesticides and for Life, an umbrella of social movements and NGOs, Alan Tygel. “Substances that are dangerous for Europeans, are also dangerous for Brazilians, Indians, Argentinians, and so on”.

The ammonia process, which uses nitrogen from the atmosphere as its key ingredient, was invented by German chemist Fritz Haber to help farmers around the world significantly improve their profitability. There is a darker side to his work as one of the most effective insecticides Harber helped to develop was Zyklon B, used by the Nazis to murder more than a million people, even including members of his own family.

Fossil fuels and greenhouse gases are great contributors to climate change, but Highly Hazardous Pesticides (HHPs), which affect the health of large parts of the population and our environment, have gone largely unrecognised.

According to the World Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, HHPs are [described](#) as “pesticides that are acknowledged to present particularly high levels of acute or chronic hazards to health or the environment according to internationally accepted classification systems”.

An investigation by *Unearthed* and *Public Eye* found that CropLife companies made approximately 27% of sales income from HHPs in high-income countries compared to 45% to low to mid-income countries. In markets like Brazil and India, HHPs made up 49% and 59% of sales respectively.

“We are in the midst of an invisible explosion of pesticide use in low to mid-income countries that are ill-equipped to manage such hazards”, [said](#) the United Nations former special rapporteur on toxic substances and human rights, Baskut Tuncak who is an international lawyer, specialising in laws and policies on the management of toxic chemicals and pollution.

There is a huge concern that in some of the low to mid income countries, many agrochemical manufacturers are involved in intensive lobbying in order to relax its pesticides regulations. For example, in May 2019, the Brazilian Agriculture Ministry approved 31 pesticides, three of them being composed of glyphosate, a substance associated with cancer that has been the target of multi-million dollar lawsuits in America. In 2018, a total of 450 of agrochemicals were approved by the Bolsonaro administration. In the same year, Brazil used more than 60,000 tons of HHPs banned in the European Union (EU).

“Many people in Europe ask us what they can do to contribute to the fight against pesticides in Brazil”, says Tygel. “And the answer is closer than it looks: the largest pesticide companies in the world are in Europe, and the continent is a major exporter of these substances. European states need to compel these companies to comply in other countries with the same rules they do in their countries of origin.”

EU is Tightening Regulation but Not Brexit Britain

The US has the most relaxed pesticide regulations amongst high-income countries and is a major exporter of banned agrochemicals to low to mid income countries. The EU is not far behind. In 2018, EU countries, including Britain, notified exports of 81,615 tons of banned pesticides, more than half of it destined to lower and middle-income countries, like Brazil, Morocco, Mexico, Ukraine and South Africa. Syngenta, Swiss-based but Chinese owned is the largest exporter of banned agrochemicals with exports of 29,307 tons.

Recently, it was announced that the EU Commission was committed to ending the practice of EU factories manufacturing banned HHPs for export. The European Commission strategy is welcomed and key to the European Green Deal, but its efforts could be broken by loopholes in European law and the fact is this deal would not prevent European companies selling those pesticides if they are manufactured outside the EU. There is absolutely nothing stopping these companies from moving their manufacturing facilities to lower and middle-income countries.

Britain is by far the largest pesticide exporter of banned pesticides in Europe and the European Commission’s decision will not apply once Brexit takes effect. Leaving the EU could mean the UK embracing a larger role in the trade and Brexit may be used to weaken

regulations. In 2018, 28,185 tons of paraquat products that Sygenta notified for export from its factory in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, was larger than all the banned pesticides for export from Italy, the Netherlands and Germany.

[Paraquat](#) has been described by Bakut Tuncak as an “unquestionably hazardous pesticide that is killing countless people around the world and resulting in who knows how many cases of health impacts such as Parkinson’s”.

In 2018, UK exports included 4,000 tons of the soil fumigant 1,3-Dichloropropene, produced by a subsidiary of the chemicals giant Ineos, which is majority-owned by Sir Jim Ratcliffe. 1,3-D is classified as a probable carcinogen and is banned in the EU.

Greenpeace described the [trade](#) as “exploitative hypocrisy” and demanded the UK Government put an end to it. Doug Parr, the campaign group’s scientist, said that the UK should stop the manufacture and export of all banned pesticides.

It is alarming that of the \$13.4 billion of sales by the CropLife companies, \$4.8 billion went on chemicals found by regulatory agencies to pose hazards like acute poisoning or chronic illness, or high toxicity to bees and other wildlife.

The world’s most popular weed-killing pesticide is glyphosate, first patented by Monsanto in 1974 and now manufactured and sold by many companies in hundreds of products. Glyphosate accounts for approximately £1 billion of CropLife sales. Bayer alone accounts for \$840 million of those sales, after its controversial takeover of Roundup manufacturer Monsanto in 2018.

“It is absolutely clear that glyphosate can cause cancers in experimental animals”, affirmed former Director of the US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Chris Portier, who worked on the International Agency for Research on Cancer review of glyphosate. “And the human evidence for an association between glyphosate and cancer is also there, predominantly for non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.”

Detrimental to Human Health and the Environment

In America, Bayer is facing billion dollar [lawsuits](#) from tens of thousands of plaintiffs who allege Roundup gave them cancer.

Herbicide atrazine and paraquat, sold mainly by [Sygenta](#), have been around since the 1960s and are now banned in the EU and Switzerland. A very small amount of paraquat can be fatal, and it has been used as means of suicide in poor rural areas. Atrazine has been found to be an endocrine disruptor and researchers in the US have found it “wreaks havoc with the sex lives of male frogs”. It has been banned in the EU since 2004 over concerns about groundwater contamination, and has been found by the United States Environmental Protection Agency to pose reproductive and developmental risks to animals and humans, particularly children.

Fipronil is another active ingredient used in insecticides marketed by BASF. This product entered Pesticide Action Network (PAN) list for its fatal effect on bees. In 2017 millions of chicken eggs were contaminated by it in Belgium and the Netherlands. It was then banned from the entire EU.

According to a [report](#) released by Swiss non-Government organisation Public Eye, “51 of the 120 pesticide active ingredients in Syngenta’s portfolio are not authorised for use in its home country, Switzerland; 16 of them were banned because of their impact on human health and the environment. But Syngenta continues selling them in lower income countries”.

The PAN International list of HHPs provides a basis for action to implement the progressive ban of highly hazardous pesticides and replace them with safer, agro-ecological and other appropriate non-chemical alternatives. PAN International was founded in 1982 and has been one of the key driving forces among non-governmental organisations for improving pesticide and crop protection policies.

The agrichemical industry refuses to accept the impact and damage it has caused to our health and environment, therefore contributing massively to climate change. The hypocrisy of it is that all HHPs banned in the EU and that are sold to developing countries end up in our supermarkets – in the food we consume.

The efforts the EU is making in order to stop the export of HHPs is commendable, but we know this is not enough. Like the tobacco industry and the fossil fuel lobby, the agrichemical industry is unlikely to give up HHPs easily. It is essential that everyone pressures them to change their products and avoid the other global health disaster that is already threatening us all.

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