

Ridding Moldovan Communities of Toxic Chemicals

Victor Neagu, Communications Associate in the Moldova World Bank Office, offers this story.

Vulcanesti is a small rural community in southern Moldova with an electrical substation that once transferred massive amounts of electricity along the Soviet grid. And it once generated thousands of pounds of some of the world's most hazardous chemicals, which Moldova had to clean up after the Soviet Union collapsed.

Derelict equipment from the Soviet times lies scattered around the electricity station that still manages the transit of electricity towards south-eastern Europe. But, lack of money over the years has meant that the disposal of polychlorinated biphenyls, an extremely toxic persistent organic pollutant (POP), was long neglected.

The incidence of cancer is high in the vicinity of the electricity plant, a fact attributed to POPs contamination of soil and water. Communities around Vulcanesti have struggled with this problem.

And Moldova has struggled with the cleanup of sites like this one, and other areas polluted by chemical used in pesticides or weapons. It is an expensive task in a country where investment in electricity infrastructure and management of electrical facilities was limited, and where economic challenges are many.

With funding from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and other donors, a cleanup project supported by the World Bank tackled the chemicals and polluted equipment at Vulcanesti and other sites. At Vulcanesti, around 1800 capacitors with contaminated soil were excavated and destroyed resulting in a full clean-up of the site.



Petru Ialanji

What was once a dumping ground for toxic pollutants where human beings could not venture without wearing a breathing mask is now a placid field where you can smell blooms on rows of newly planted trees.

"We managed to clean up the plant and generate some revenues from the sale of scrapped metal," said Petru Ialanji, Manager of the Vulcanesti Electricity Plant. "Today, this facility looks completely different, orderly and green."

Cleaning up chemicals is a national challenge for Moldova. Warehouses from Soviet days remain full of pesticides, military depots are stuffed with toxic fuels from missiles, and a range of other POPs-containing substances left to disintegrate.

Although countries in Western Europe and the US banned a range of these substances as early as the 1970s, Moldova's poverty has meant no action was taken to stop using them for many years. It was only at the turn of this century that international efforts to eliminate and restrict the use of POPs, under the Stockholm Convention, have mobilized international funding to help countries like Moldova clean up.



Valentin Plesca

The World Bank stepped in to help the government address the challenge.

"This project has been unique for Moldova in many ways," said Valentin Plesca, Head of the Project Implementation Unit. "We managed to succeed in addressing a major health problem and focus international attention on the country." said

Assistance from NATO and others further supported the country in this effort. Over 2,300 tons of POPs-containing pesticides and capacitors have been

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..... destroyed and 17,000 PCB-contaminated capacitors have been dismantled.

Yet the problem is far from being ticked off the list. Moldova's social and economic problems make it difficult to tackle the entire problem. Over 2,000 tons of POPs-containing pesticides still need to be destroyed.

The World Bank has helped set up a national framework for control and elimination of POPs and has supported the creation of a regulatory system to oversee the management of POPs and other toxic chemicals and wastes. The government is determined to make it fully functional, but commitment in the long run is critical to prevent the risks of contamination and toxicity for Moldova in the years ahead.