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ENVIRONMENT:

A Dozen Countries Take on Toxic Pollution

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UXBRIDGE, Canada, 29 Oct (IPS) - Of the tens of thousands of toxic sites affecting the health of 500 million people in the middle- and low-income countries of world, only 12 are being cleaned up, according to a new report.

"We could only find 12 sites," said Richard Fuller, founder of the Blacksmith Institute, which issued a report detailing "12 Cases of Clean-up and Success" Wednesday.

Blacksmith, an independent environmental group, in partnership with Green Cross Switzerland spent the past year soliciting and verifying contamination clean-up at heavily polluted sites anywhere in the world outside of North America and Europe.

"If that was the situation in the West, there'd be a huge public outcry and billions of dollars spent for clean-up," Fuller told IPS. "We've shipped our dirty industries overseas and the pollution moved with them."

Previous Blacksmith reports have documented the world's worst pollution problems, such as toxic waste, air pollution, ground and surface water contamination, metal smelting and processing, used car battery recycling and artisanal gold mining. These affect human health on a scale with HIV/AIDS and malaria, but receive little international attention or funding.

This year, Blacksmith has focused on successes in remediation and mitigation in an effort to illustrate that solutions are not difficult - mainly because the rich countries have already cleaned up their own backyards and have the knowledge and technologies.

"These problems can be tackled successfully even with limited funding, and through models that can be replicated around the world," Fuller said.

"These 12 are the pinpricks of light," said David Hanrahan, director of Global Operations at Blacksmith.

One of those points of light is a programme in Accra, Ghana to build and install high-efficiency cooking stoves to dramatically improve indoor air quality.

Globally, indoor air pollution from burning of biomass in smoky, inefficient stoves leads to nearly three million premature deaths each year, Hanrahan said.

In 2008, 68,000 new stoves were sold in Accra and Kumasi, Ghana, potentially providing cleaner indoor air for approximately 400,000 people, including 160,000 children. The locally made Gyapa Charcoal and Wood Stoves reduced levels of harmful particulates in homes by 40 to 45 percent, Hanrahan said.

Since 2002, EnterpriseWorks Ghana, Shell Foundation and USAID have worked to create a network of local craftspeople and entrepreneurs who can profitably manufacture the metal stoves and their ceramic liners. Demand is being driven by a public awareness campaign on the health effects of cooking fire.

By the end of the year, 100,000 stoves will have been sold, improving the health of over half a million people, he said.

Such stoves also improve outdoor air quality by reducing black carbon or soot from inefficient combustion. Black carbon or soot is also responsible for at least 20 to 30 percent of the current overall global warming, according to the latest climate research.

"This [high-efficiency stove] is the fastest 'bang for the buck' to reduce black carbon, methane and other gas emissions as well as improving air quality and health," Kirk Smith, professor of global environmental health at the University of California, told IPS earlier this year.

But there is no money to put these stoves into the homes of an estimated 500 million poor families that need them. Costing between 30 and 50 dollars each, they are too expensive for most poor people to buy without help. And most health or development agencies don't have the money either.

The other main source of soot is from older diesel and two-stroke engines. When Delhi, India replaced smoky diesel buses with those powered by natural gas and added more stringent air pollution regulations on other vehicles, air pollution improved significantly, Hanrahan said.

Cleaner diesel fuels and black carbon filters can reduce emissions from engines by 90 percent, other studies have shown.

Countries like China that now have the resources are conducting comprehensive assessments and will clean up the many thousands of toxic sites and polluted lands and rivers that are the legacy of their rapid economic growth, Fuller said. People there are beginning to understand the connection between pollution and their health, which is not the case in many other countries.

"I'm told that 60 percent of local uprisings against the government are because of pollution problems," he added.

Blacksmith is compiling a global inventory of toxic sites and problems in 80 countries that has reached 1,000 and will eventually be around 2,500 locations when completed in the next couple of years. "Most of the 1,000 sites we know about have not been touched," Fuller said.

Blacksmith and its partners have cleaned up around 20 sites with a budget of 30 million dollars. Tackling these problems will require international funding, where a billion dollars would make a huge impact on the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Blacksmith is also trying to create a health and pollution fund to collect and distribute donations from countries and donor agencies so something can be done to clean up the worst problems.

"We can't forget that poverty is the number one overriding problem. Many people have terribly hard and difficult lives," Fuller said.

The rest of the 12 clean up sites are:

- * Candelaria, Chile: comprehensive copper tailings disposal and water conservation treatment system;
- * Chernobyl-affected areas, Eastern Europe: medical, psychological and educational interventions to improve the lives and livelihoods of those living in the zone of radiation contamination;
- * Haina, Dominican Republic: removal of soil contaminated by the improper recycling of used car batteries to reduce lead levels in children's blood;
- * Kalimantan, Indonesia: new techniques to reduce mercury poisoning from artisanal gold mining;
- * Old Korogwe, Tanzania: removal of a stockpile of pesticides responsible for contaminating soil and a nearby river, poisoning the local residents;
- * Rudnaya Pristan Region, Russia: removal of lead-contaminated soil in children's playgrounds in order to lower blood lead levels in children;
- * Shanghai, China: 12-year programme to clean up sewage in an urban waterway that supplies drinking water to millions; and
- * West Bengal, India: reduction in arsenic poisoning through removal of naturally occurring arsenic in well water.

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