



# REPORT SUMMARY: PESTICIDES & RIGHT TO FOOD

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# INTRODUCTION

The present report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food was written in collaboration with the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes. Pesticides, which have been aggressively promoted, are a global human rights concern, and their use can have detrimental consequences on the enjoyment of the right to food. Pesticides are defined as any substance or mixture of substances of chemical and biological ingredients intended to repel, destroy or control any pest or regulate plant growth, Pesticides are also responsible for an estimated 200,000 acute poisoning deaths each year, 99 per cent of which occur in developing countries, where health, safety and environmental regulations are weaker and less strictly applied.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK

### HUMAN RIGHTS LAW paras 40-53

The right to adequate food provides a guarantee for food that is necessary to achieve an adequate standard of living. In addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this right has been codified in article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, in its general comment No. 12 (1999) considers that the right to food implies that food is free from adverse substances, and asserts that States must implement food safety requirements and protective measures to ensure that food is safe and qualitatively adequate. Under even the narrowest interpretation of article 11 and general comment No. 12, food that is contaminated by pesticides cannot be considered adequate food.

Articles 11 and 12 of the Convention of Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women addresses women's rights to protection from health and safety, which includes prenatal care which pesticides often endanger. The Convention of the Rights of the Child also defines provisions to protect children from contaminants. The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer calls for the phase out and control of methyl bromide, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants provides for global prohibition and restrictions for a certain set of hazardous pesticides. The Convention on Biological Diversity is also relevant as pesticides are quite detrimental to biodiversity.

# ADVERSE EFFECTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

## A. Human health paras 9-31

Unfortunately, there are no reliable, global statistics on the number of people who suffer from pesticide exposure, however, estimates indicate that it may be as high as 41 million due to exposure through food, water, air, or direct contact with pesticides or residues. Of grave concern are the impacts of chronic exposure to hazardous pesticides, and pesticide poisonings, especially in developing countries. Pesticide exposure has been linked to cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, hormone disruption, developmental disorders and sterility. They can also cause numerous neurological health effects such as memory loss, loss of coordination, reduced visual ability and reduced motor skills. Other possible effects include asthma, allergies and hypersensitivity. Farmers and agricultural workers, communities living near agricultural lands, indigenous communities, pregnant women and children, and consumers are particularly susceptible to exposure and adverse impacts.

## B. Environmental Impacts paras 32-39

Pesticides can persist in the environment for decades and pose a global threat to the entire ecological system upon which food production depends. Excessive use and misuse of pesticides result in contamination of surrounding soil and water sources, causing loss of biodiversity, destroying beneficial insect populations that act as natural enemies of pests and reducing the nutritional value of food. Pesticides contaminate and degrade soil to varying degrees. Insecticides are accused of being responsible for "colony collapse disorder" of bees worldwide, as there has been a 50 per cent decline over 25 years in honeybee populations in the United States and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Many of the pesticides used today, accounting for approximately 60 per cent of dietary exposure, are systemic. Seeds treated with systemic pesticides are commonly used in soybean, corn and peanut production. Similarly, crops may be genetically engineered (GMOs) to produce pesticides themselves. Considering their probable grave effects on health and the environment, there is an urgent need for holistic regulation on the basis of the precautionary principle to address the genetically engineered production process and other new technologies at the global level

# ALTERNATIVE TO EXTENSIVE PESTICIDE USE: AGROECOLOGY

paras 90-100

The assertion promoted by the agrochemical industry that pesticides are necessary to achieve food security is not only inaccurate, but dangerously misleading. A rise in organic agricultural practices in many places illustrates that farming with less or without any pesticides is feasible. Studies have indicated that agroecology is capable of delivering sufficient yields to feed the entire world population and ensure that they are adequately nourished.

Agroecology, considered by many as the foundation of sustainable agriculture, replaces chemicals with biology. It is the integrative study of the ecology of the entire food system, encompassing ecological, economic and social dimensions. It promotes agricultural practices that are adapted to local environments and stimulate beneficial biological interactions between different plants and species to build long-term fertility and soil health

In ecological farming, crops are protected from pest damage by enhancing biodiversity and encouraging the presence of natural enemies of pests. Examples include developing habitats around farms, using crop rotation and planting cover crops to help protect the soil from various pathogens and to suppress weeds and increase organic content.

Over the past decades, diversity in farming systems has been greatly reduced in terms of crops and varieties grown in natural habitats. The result is a loss of ecosystem services like natural pest control through predators and a loss of soil fertility. As most seed companies are now owned by agrochemical companies, there is limited interest in developing robust varieties. In order to succeed with pesticide reduction, it is essential to reintroduce diversity into agriculture and move away from monocultures of single varieties.

Agroecological farming can help secure livelihoods for smallholder farmers and those living in poverty, including women, because there is no heavy reliance on expensive external inputs. If properly managed, biodiversity and efficient use of resources can enable smallholder farms to be more productive per hectare than large industrial farms (A/HRC/16/49).

# SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS paras 106-108

The international community must work on a comprehensive, binding treaty to regulate hazardous pesticides throughout their life cycle, taking into account human rights principles. Such an instrument should:

- (a) Aim to remove existing double standards among countries that are particularly detrimental to countries with weaker regulatory systems;
- (b) Generate policies to reduce pesticide use worldwide and develop a framework for the banning and phasing-out of hazardous pesticides;
- (c) Promote agroecology;
- (d) Place strict liability on pesticide producers.

States should also:

- (a) Develop comprehensive national action plans;
- (b) Establish systems to enable various national agencies to address the adverse impact of pesticides and to mitigate risks related to their use;
- (c) Establish impartial and independent risk-assessment and registration processes for pesticides, with full disclosure requirements;
- (d) Consider non-chemical alternatives first, and only allow chemicals to be registered where need can be demonstrated;
- (e) Enact safety measures to ensure adequate protections for pregnant women, children and other groups who are vulnerable to pesticide exposure;
- (f) Fund comprehensive scientific studies on health effects of pesticides;
- (g) Guarantee rigorous and regular analysis of food and beverages to determine levels of hazardous residues, and make public such information;
- (h) Closely monitor agricultural pesticide use and storage to minimize risks;
- (i) Create buffer zones around plantations and farms;
- (j) Organize training programmes for farmers to raise awareness of the harmful effects of hazardous pesticides and of alternative methods;
- (k) Safeguard the public's right to information, including level of residues on the labels of food and drink products;
- (l) Regulate corporations to respect human rights and avoid environmental damage during the entire life cycle of pesticides.