
Malaysia: Severe health effects of pesticides on workers in oil palm plantations

Pesticides negatively impact the health and lives of millions of agricultural pesticide users, their communities and consumers worldwide –they also cause great damage to biodiversity and the environment. The pesticides used in oil palm plantations have adverse impacts on human health and the environment. Agricultural workers in oil palm plantations are heavily exposed to pesticides and suffer a range of dangerous acute and chronic health effects, though many remain tragically ignorant of the causes.

Tenaganita and PAN AP have carried out numerous surveys in Malaysian oil palm plantations during the last few years which have revealed horrendous working conditions. These include workers spraying pesticides without any knowledge of their hazards; not being provided with protective clothing; and even cases where the labels are removed from the pesticide bottles before being given to workers so that they are unable to identify the pesticide used.

Workers complaining about pesticide poisoning are treated callously by the medical personnel and often prescribed paracetamol for pain and skin creams for skin irritation. Workers in oil palm plantations, are reluctant to report pesticide poisoning for fear of losing their jobs or retaliation, or because they cannot afford the time off or medical costs. The impacts of pesticides compromise people's ability to work, earn a living, and conduct community and livelihood functions.

Long term chronic impacts (including systemic damage and diseases, cancer, reproductive health problems and hormonal disruption) seriously threaten rural communities' long term survival. Endocrine disruption can affect particularly unborn babies —disturbing growth and formation, causing systemic and functional deficiencies like lowered IQ levels, susceptibility to disease, behavioural problems, and effects on future fertility. These impacts on children seriously threaten the future of whole communities, and could mire communities in more social and economic disintegration, greater poverty and suffering.

Women are particularly susceptible due to physiological characteristics and socio-cultural and economic circumstances as they are often the poorest of the poor. Impacts on women's health (and children) are critical as the pesticides women workers spray are potentially toxic to the foetus. Women can be exposed even if they do not directly apply the pesticides, and yet are less likely to receive training to reduce risks. Such is the case with the Glufosinate ammonium, a groundwater contaminant that has toxicity to humans, including carcinogenicity, reproductive and developmental toxicity, neurotoxicity, and acute toxicity.

Some of the pesticides used in oil palm plantations may produce chronic illness and death in humans --like endosulfan, an endocrine disrupting chemical insecticide that acts primarily on the nervous system known to interfere with hormonal mechanisms at very low concentrations; 2,4-D dimethylamine and diuron, that are potential carcinogens; glyphosate, cypermethrin and carbofuran, maneb, that are possible endocrine disrupting pesticides.

Paraquat is a highly hazardous pesticide that is known to cause the highest number of poisoning of agricultural workers in the oil palm plantations in Malaysia. The Malaysian government announced a ban on paraquat but the ban has not been implemented due to the pressure from the industry. The symptoms of paraquat poisoning are nosebleeds, tearing of the eyes, contact dermatitis, skin irritation and sores, nail discolouration, dropping of the nails, and abdominal ulcerations. Damage to the lungs, for example, may not be evident until several days after absorption. There is no antidote against paraquat poisoning. The outcome can be fatal and in these cases death results from respiratory failure. In 1994, the Danish government had imposed bans and severe restrictions on 7 pesticides -including paraquat- it considered a threat to health, the environment or both. The Danish decision to ban paraquat, enacted in 1995, was based on its persistence, and its toxicity to non-target organisms.

However, as the Pesticide Action Network's regional office for Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) has already expressed, "in Malaysia the industries' profits override the health considerations of the people."

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