

A MESSAGE FROM THE ICA

The 9th Conference of Parties to the Rotterdam Convention (COP-9) came to an end a few days ago and, as it has been the case too often since its inception, it finds itself in such a state of disruption that the instrument itself and – by way of consequence – those who are responsible for its work are once again discredited.

It is now quite obvious that many stakeholders seem to have completely forgotten the Convention's primary objective, which is worth reminding. First and foremost, member States wanted to put in place a procedure of information and consent for the international trade of certain chemical products and pesticides while taking into consideration the specific situation and needs of developing countries or transition economies.

The Convention aims to encourage the sharing of responsibilities and cooperation between Parties involved in the commerce of certain dangerous chemical products (...) through facilitating the exchange of information on their characteristics (...) and ensuring that its decisions are communicated to the Parties.

Nowhere in the Convention can a specification be found that would force the Parties to register on its "black list" a product, a substance or a mixture that can be used in a safe, controlled and responsible way.

Unfortunately, COP-9 once again played host to the sad performance of anti-asbestos crusaders. Once again, it essentially turned into an anti-chrysotile activity. Yet, over the last decades, very few natural synthetic substances have been as thoroughly and scientifically studied, researched, evaluated around the world as the natural serpentine fibre known as chrysotile. Even rarer in the realm of international trade, few, if any products or fibres have been submitted to a program of safe and responsible use as consistent and rigorous as the one devised and applied to chrysotile by the industry.

Chrysotile's safe use is a fact, not a myth. Its efficiency is recognized and its results, indisputable. Science has also confirmed that there are huge differences between the amphibole and serpentine fibres, whether from the point of view of their chemical structure or that of the true risk they pose to human health or the environment. This has been confirmed by numerous scientific studies, namely on the fibres' biopersistence.

Despite all this, throughout the COP-9 meeting, crusaders who want to include chrysotile on the "black list" once again maliciously refused to consider these facts and to recognize that only amphibole fibres should be banned, and not chrysotile, which should be controlled. They also kept silent on the obvious risks associated with the use of replacement products and fibres, whose degree of innocuousness have not been scientifically demonstrated. How sad!

At the end of the Conference's work, a group of crusaders, Ban Asbestos, published a press release which clearly illustrates their state of mind, titled *Financial interests of just a few Parties block the desires of the many to protect workers like me from toxic exposures...*

This shows the kind of disrespect those militants have for all countries which have rejected the inclusion of chrysotile in the list of banned products and for those who have refused to take position on this matter. Yet, together, these countries represent more than two third of humankind. They are countries who badly need a fibre such as chrysotile to improve the living conditions of their communities. Chrysotile is a fibre with important essential properties that can be used safely, an efficient and affordable product that responds to those countries' infrastructural needs.

But such considerations are not of the utmost importance for anti-asbestos crusaders, their interest lies elsewhere as they pursue their crusade in the name of public health which quite obviously bears a great deal...

Lastly, in the final report (extracts) issued by the Convention's Secretariat, one can note a certain bitterness or disappointment as well as the importance given to the comments of Parties calling for inclusion while very little information is given on the numerous and informative objections made by participants who detailed the motives behind their objection to such inclusion. Such lack of information on this aspect of the discussions can but leave observers and representatives of the Convention's member States wondering.

In conclusion, the ICA wishes to highlight the Secretariat's report's very last paragraph which states: « *Given the lack of consensus the Conference of the Parties agreed to defer further consideration of Chrysotile Asbestos to its tenth meeting.* »

The wording couldn't be clearer, but it is also worrying. It would be naive to think that the crusade to end the use of chrysotile around the world will stop. Quite to the contrary, it will continue because this Convention has unfortunately become the anti-asbestos crusaders' favorite focal point. We have already been informed of what will happen at COP-10 (in 2021), and some people within the Secretariat are already at work to continue this aberration that has been going on for more than a decade while developing countries are struggling with other, very real problems. If this appointment is a challenge from the anti-asbestos crusaders, let it be known that the ICA will be there to defend the safe and responsible use of a natural fibre which is useful namely in the building of sanitary infrastructure in the world's poorest countries.