

THE FUTURE WE DON'T NEED: ELIMINATING THE IMPACTS OF HAZARDOUS WASTES ON OUR CHILDREN

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For a long time, the world has known about the effects that mismanaged hazardous wastes have had on the human population and our environment. However, it is usually the most vulnerable segment of these populations that are subject to the full impact of these substances: the children of the world. In Trinidad and Tobago, like any other small island state in the developing world, the issue is more pronounced. With little or no environmentally sound options for dealing with its hazardous wastes and with limited land area and capacity to properly establish such systems, the nation's populace has long been at risk from exposure to these life-threatening substances. This was the case in the 1990s in Wallerfield, Trinidad and Tobago, where some of the country's children became victims of the indiscriminate dumping of lead wastes.

A small, rural village located in east Trinidad, Wallerfield is home to an informal community of approximately 500 citizens. In the 1990s, children under the age of 10 made up almost half of its population. It was this cohort that highlighted the issue of lead contamination. The problem was identified when several children were brought to nearby hospitals displaying symptoms of lead poisoning. The situation arose as a result of the recycling and disposal of lead slag and car batteries in the area since the start of the 1990s. This included their reuse in road and home repairs throughout the community, including areas where children played. The wastes were also used by some residents to

¹⁸ <http://bcrc-caribbean.blogspot.ch/>

create lead sinkers for the fishing industry as a source of income. The situation climaxed in the death of a 10 year old boy from severe lead poisoning.

This incident garnered the attention of several national organisations and the general public at large. Institutions such as the Environmental Management Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (EMA) and the Ministry of Health were called upon to address the situation. A Task Force on Lead Poisoning was established by the Cabinet and even international organisations such as the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), the US Centre for Disease Control and the US Environmental Protection Agency came to assist in solving this particular scenario as well as the wider lead management problem in Trinidad and Tobago.

These entities sought to address the issue by providing immediate medical attention for the children, as well as evacuation, permanent resettlement in some instances and land decontamination and remediation of lead 'hot spots' throughout the entire community. The EMA led the decontamination work along with other members of the Task Force. This included identification, characterisation and mapping of the contaminated area. Finally, the lead contaminated soil was excavated, transported and treated prior to being disposed of in an encapsulated and secure area of one of the national landfills.

This incident and the subsequent activities resulted in the protection of the health of the children from the previous impacts of the contaminated soil as well as in the creation of a contamination-free area in which they could live. The situation also raised public awareness on the 'lead problem', the contamination situation and the impact of hazardous wastes in the local community and among the wider population. Furthermore, it successfully demonstrated the ability of multiple stakeholders to immediately respond, cooperate and coordinate national efforts to protect human health – an effort that ensured that Trinidad and Tobago's most vulnerable, its children, were guaranteed their future.