

COMMENT

ALLY JAMAH

Sustainable development advocate based in Nairobi



Transitioning from lead additives in paints doesn't imperil the bottom line of manufacturers. Non-toxic, affordable alternatives are available. Some manufacturers have switched to safe products



AFRICA MUST ACT AGAINST LEAD PAINTS

The majority of African countries are yet to outlaw harmful paints containing heavy metal lead despite their documented and far-reaching negative health and economic impacts, and the high risks of exposure to them facing many people on the continent.

We can no longer brush aside the pressing need to keep unsafe paints out of our homes, schools, and workplaces. We can do this through developing and enforcing mandates against lead paints, and enhancing public and industry awareness about their dangers.

Information compiled from the United Nations Environment Programme, World Health Organization and other credible sources indicates that as of June 30, 2022, less than a quarter of Africa's 54 countries had laws or standards restricting the manufacture, importation and sale of paints containing toxic lead compounds.

In comparison, highly industrialised countries phased out lead paints in the 1970s and 80s, saving millions of people from preventable and devastating exposure to lead pollution. Most African countries missed the 2020 target to legislate against lead paints as advocated by the Global Alliance to Eliminate Lead in Paints. The Alliance brings together governments, industry, civil society, and other actors, and is coordinated by Unep and WHO.

It's encouraging that a number of countries on the continent are now at various stages of developing or revising their laws to disallow paints with lead exceeding 90 parts per million in line with global recommendation. However, in parts of Africa with legal frameworks against lead paints such as Kenya, the will and capacity to enforce them is not always robust, especially in informal paint sector where the use of lead additives is rampant. This needs to be relooked.

We are paying a huge price amid the silent and avoidable crisis of lead pollution from paints. The estimated annual economic cost of childhood lead exposure alone in Africa is \$134.7 billion, or four per cent of the continent's Gross Domestic Product. This is based on decreased intelligence and lost lifetime economic productivity.

Ingesting or inhaling lead dust from paints and other sources can irreversibly impede mental development

of children. It can cause miscarriage, stillbirth and malformations in pregnant women. It is also linked to anaemia, kidney damage, hypertension, and reproductive impairments.

While there are multiple sources of lead exposure, the most widespread in Africa tends to be paints containing added lead compounds. Eliminating them would therefore have significant health and economic benefits.

Tests conducted by NGO IPEN on solvent-based decorative household paints in a dozen African countries found more than half (55 per cent) of the nearly 600 paint cans sampled had lead content exceeding the recommended maximum of 90 ppm. Some were as high as 10,000 ppm. This demonstrates the gravity and urgency of the challenge.

DESPITE THE HIGH LEAD EXPOSURE RISKS FROM PAINTS IN AFRICA, AWARENESS IS STILL LIMITED

Transitioning from lead additives in paints doesn't imperil the bottom line of paint manufacturers. Non-toxic and equally affordable alternatives are easily available. Some manufacturers have successfully switched to safe products, but others in the formal and informal sectors may need technical support to do so.

Lead compounds are usually added to oil-based decorative and industrial paints and related products to enhance brightness, reduce corrosion on metal surfaces or shorten drying time. After application, the paint may chip off or get disturbed during building renovations thus contaminating the air and soil. Children may also swallow lead if they mouth and chew toys painted with lead paint.

Despite the high lead exposure risks from paints in Africa, awareness is still limited. Robust public awareness campaigns should accompany initiatives to develop and enforce legal regimes to cut new lead paint use and to safely manage surfaces and objects already covered with lead paints.

Advocates against leaded paints are hoping to replicate the successful global campaign that phased out leaded petrol, which was also a major source of lead exposure.