

## Press Release

Launching of Chemical Users Network of Ethiopia (ChemNet Ethiopia)

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It is not easy to define what a chemical is. We may say practically everything that surrounds us can be considered directly or indirectly as chemical or one derived from it. The principal chemicals in the air we inhale are oxygen and nitrogen, and we exhale them again with the addition of carbon dioxide.

Modern society owes its accelerated progress to the rapid growth of chemistry, the science that is mostly concerned with the study of the changes that take place in transforming one chemical to the other. We need chemical to improve our quality of life. Take for instance, soap, is it conceivable to lead hygienic life without using it? Or have a modern society without having access to a wide array of insecticides, herbicides, drugs, fertilizers, antiseptics?

Chemicals are needed in schools, universities and in research institutes so that our youth learn the basic principles of chemistry and other branches of science and because many types of chemicals are important tools for research and service.

Unfortunately use of chemicals is increasingly becoming a risky business. This is because many chemicals are toxic. Paracelsus a 16<sup>th</sup> century chemist said that "Everything is poisonous. The dose alone determines the poison." We know too well right from our childhood days that too much of anything may be painful and indeed fatal. This is so true of chemicals, even common salt, which is so innocuous and so vital for sustenance of life, may not be good for our health if consumed in abnormal amounts.

We therefore need to be concerned on how we should handle chemicals in our environment in general and specifically at home, at the work place, in schools, in factories etc. We should therefore not accumulate chemicals that we may not have use for. Since the main purpose of our Project here is to find ways and means of using chemicals optimally in schools, universities and research institutes in Ethiopia, we will limit our subsequent presentation to these areas.

Almost all the chemicals that we use in these domains are imported from abroad at high cost. Chemicals are critical and essential inputs in teaching and research activities in the fields of science, pharmacy, medicine, agriculture and even in some areas of engineering. However the acquisition of chemicals by such institutions has to date been not coordinated. The decision what and how much to purchase is left to each unit, but the implementation of the purchase process is

controlled by a highly bureaucratic and unfriendly system, that gives heed neither to the expertise of the users of the chemicals nor of the importers or manufacturers of the chemicals.

In the Faculty of Science of the AAU, the three major users of chemicals are the departments of Biology, Chemistry and Earth Science. The chemical budget of the Faculty is divided proportionately among the three. Each department then handles its purchase of chemicals with little or no consultation with the other. As a result a chemical that may be available in one of the departments may be ordered by the other from abroad. In the wider University domain, the problem is similar, because other users of chemicals also handle their purchases unilaterally e.g. Pharmacy, the Basic Sciences in Medicine, Chemical Engineering, Veterinary etc.

These state of affairs promoted us to consider launching a Chemical Users Network of Ethiopia (ChemNet Ethiopia). Our first task was to compile a database of chemicals available in the different teaching laboratories, research groups and stores of the various units of the AAU. We first entered into Excel the chemicals available in the different teaching and research laboratories in the Chemistry Department, accumulated over several years of teaching and research work. We selected only those chemicals that are still kept in the original bottles in which they were imported in. We kept the survey of the big central store of the department as our final task. We repeated the same exercise in the different laboratories of the Biology Department, followed by School of Pharmacy, School of Medicine, Chemical Engineering, Aklilu Lema Institute of Pathobiology. After getting a good grip of the home front, we are now encourage to embark on the more daunting task of including into our Database chemicals in other institutions in the Capital City (Quality and Standards Authority of Ethiopia, Ethiopian Health and Nutrition Research Institute, Geological Survey, EPHARM etc), which will be followed by survey of chemicals available at regional universities and chemical importers and other research institutes in the country. We are aware of the fact that this will be a continual process. It is gratifying to note that so far we did not face any hurdle at all to register the chemicals.

Use ChemNet's Website to check if a chemical one wishes to obtain is available in the country and if it is possible to have the desired chemical from a local source before ordering it from abroad. ChemNet will then facilitate if it is possible for a user to have the chemical speedily from within the country through a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Another planned task is to register chemicals that are no longer wanted by the owner institution. We intend to explore ways and means of disposing such chemicals. We have also come to know that there are many chemicals whose labels are no longer on their containers. In some cases through analytical services it may be possible to establish the identity of such chemicals so that they could be put to use. (April 13, 2007. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia).

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