

Backyard battery recycling is biggest chemical polluter for poorer nations

Report finds mining, leather tanning, rubbish dumps and the dye industry among the most polluting industries harming health and causing early death

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The backyard recycling of lead-acid car batteries is the number one source of chemical pollution in the world's poorer nations and leads to millions of years of healthy life being lost, according to a new report.

The World's Worst Pollution Problems, published by NGOs Pure Earth and Green Cross Switzerland on Tuesday, reveals the top 10 most polluting industries in low and middle-income countries.

Mining, leather tanning, rubbish dumps and the dye industry are among the most polluting activities harming health and causing early deaths. The NGOs estimate 200 million people are at risk in the 50 nations they analysed.

Old lead acid batteries are increasingly reused as some nations lack lead deposits and the rising number of cars is driving an upsurge in demand. However, in poorer nations the batteries are often opened with axes or hammers and the melting of the recovered lead takes place in homes.

As a result, lead is spread throughout homes and communities and the dumping of battery remnants pollutes local soil and water supplies. Children are particularly vulnerable to the lead pollution, which can profoundly affect their development. South-east Asia is a hotspot for informal lead-acid battery recycling, but it also occurs in Africa and Central and South America.

Richard Fuller, president of Pure Earth, said chemical pollution is a growing and under-reported problem: "Pollution and the diseases that it causes have become a massive and extremely costly global problem." He said the pollution can be tackled but poorer nations can lack the resources to do so, meaning those people most in need end up further marginalised.

David Hanrahan, a senior adviser at Pure Earth, said: "Large as these numbers [of people at risk] are, they are almost certainly underestimates. In its most current figures, the World Health Organisation reports that an estimated 23% of all deaths in 2012 - representing 12.6 million people - were attributable to environmental risk factors, including pollution." He said the WHO estimated 20% of all cancers resulted from pollution.

Another industry highlighted in the new report is small-scale artisanal gold mining, where individuals dig for gold and use highly toxic mercury to collect the precious metal. This activity produces 20% of the world's gold production but releases more mercury into the environment

than any other sector worldwide. It is estimated that artisanal gold mining occurs in up to 55 countries and employs between 10-15 million miners.

The report estimated that up to 1.6m “disability adjusted life years” (Dalys) are lost each year as a result of artisanal gold mining. A Daly is a year of healthy living lost by a person as a result of harm to their health. Informal lead-acid battery recycling is responsible for up to 4.8m lost Dalys each year, the report said.

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