

# Upholding children's rights against exposure to pesticides.

Suzanne Astic - Policy and advocacy adviser on children's rights and chemicals, CRIN

Illustrations by Miriam Sugranyes, CRIN

# Why are children more vulnerable and impacted by pesticides exposure?



- **Developmental vulnerability:** children's organs and nervous systems are still in development, **both during the prenatal and after-birth stages.**
- **Exceeding intake:** higher intake than adults, e.g. they **breath more often per minute.** Children consume more food and water relative to their weight, absorb toxics more readily, and are less able to excrete them.
- **Behavioral habits:** Children play on the ground, in watercourses, exploring the world through touch and taste. **Children are also less able to evaluate risks.**
- **Dose doesn't make the poison:** Exposure - incl. **prenatal** - to pesticides can be linked to severe health problems, **even at very low doses.** Fetal and childhood exposure can increase the risks of cancer, birth defects, neurological diseases, degraded cognitive function, loss of fertility and impaired brain development.

# Amplified vulnerability of children in rural areas in the EU ...

- Testings and scientific studies indicate the **recurrent presence of pesticides in European rural areas**, e.g.:

- May 2024: Joint research found alarming water contamination with TFA in EU countries and “PFAS pesticides appear to be the **main cause of water contamination with TFA in rural areas**”.

- **Marginalisation amplifying the vulnerability**

- Children in marginalised demographics, such as EU rural areas, **suffer the greatest harms of all**, with reduced resilience to ill-health associated with economic deprivation and isolation (incl. difficult access to healthcare).
- Contaminated food and water also threatens the health of vulnerable rural groups, often disproportionately affecting low-income communities.



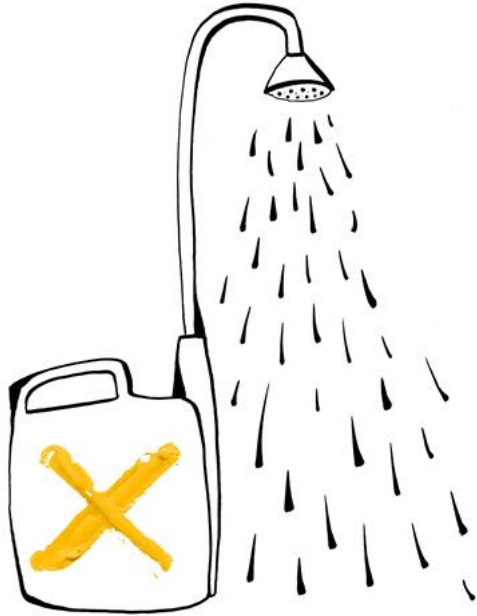
## ... and beyond: EU's role in contamination of rural areas worldwide

- Example of pesticides contamination and impacts on children
  - In Brazil, the Ministry of Health warned that for each notified pesticide poisoning event, there are another 50 not reported. Direct intoxication from agricultural chemicals has **alarming incidences on children, who are proportionally the most affected.**



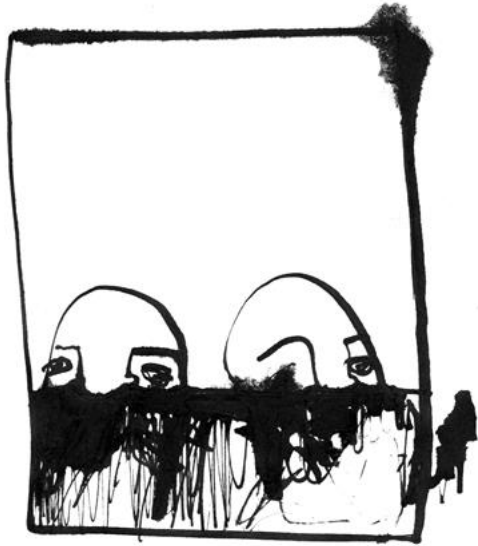
The EU continues to allow the export of domestically banned hazardous pesticides to non-EU countries. This **double standard leads to severe children's rights violations** and contributes to **amplifying children's marginalisation and vulnerability.**

# Impacts of pesticides on children's rights



- 2020 Report of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/43/30)
  - States must **prevent childhood toxic exposure** to protect children's rights to life, survival, development, health and bodily integrity.
  
- 2022 UN General Assembly Resolution (A/76/L.75)
  - Unsound management of chemicals **interferes with the enjoyment of a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.**
  
- 2023 Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment 26 on children's rights and the environment
  - Urges States to “**address the adverse effects of environmental degradation** (...) on the enjoyment of children's rights”

# Impacts of pesticides on children's rights



## ➤ UN Convention on the rights of the child (UNCRC)

- Rights to **life**, to the **highest attainable standard of health**, right to **non-discrimination**, right to **education**, to recreation and **play**, etc.
- Right to **physical integrity**: “non-consensual physical or mental intrusion against the body constitutes a human rights violation”
  - SR on toxics and human rights, Baskut Tuncak, explained that **human exposure to toxic substances constitute such an intrusion**, whether it's acute poisoning or low level exposure to toxic substances.
- Obligation to prioritize the best interests of the child **when designing environmental and public health norms**, and ensure access to information and effective remedies.

# Impacts of pesticides on children's rights

## ➤ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

- **Binds all EU Member states, with the same legal value as the EU Treaties.**
- Article 24 guarantees and protects the **rights and best interest of the child**. In all actions relating to children, whether taken by public authorities or private institutions, **the child's best interests must be a primary consideration**.
- Article 2 guarantees the **right to life**, and Article 37 prescribes **environmental protection**.

## ➤ EU Strategy on the rights of the child

- Mainstreaming a **children's rights perspective in all relevant policies and legislation**.
- Promoting inclusive and child-friendly societies, health and education systems.  
**All children have a right to a good standard of living.**



# Time for the EU to uphold children's rights

" (...) today the average individual almost certainly **starts life with the first deposit of the growing load of chemicals** his body will be required to carry thenceforth."

- Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 1962



- Independent scientific studies outline that children living in rural areas in the EU and beyond are **particularly affected by the exposure to hazardous pesticides**, and suffer from severe violations of their human rights.
- Children should not only be protected because they are the most vulnerable or because they are the “adults of tomorrow”, but also because **they are rightholders today**, and should be protected as such.
- If the EU doesn't urgently take actions against the production and use of hazardous pesticides, it will continue to be responsible for the **ongoing children's rights violations** related to pesticides exposure and the **toxic legacy** contaminating children in Europe and beyond.



**Upholding children's rights** should be a **key compass** for decision-making in the European Union, not an afterthought.

More resources available at: <https://home.crin.org/eu-toxics>

Art exhibition available at:  
<https://home.crin.org/projects/environment-and-toxics>

Contact details: [suzanne@crin.org](mailto:suzanne@crin.org)

**CRIN** CHILD  
RIGHTS  
INTERNATIONAL  
NETWORK

