A Conversation with
Björn Beeler, May 2020

Participants

- Björn Beeler, General Manager & International Coordinator, International Pollutants Elimination Network (IPEN)
- Ali Ladak - Research Analyst, Charity Entrepreneurship

Note: These notes were compiled by Charity Entrepreneurship and give an overview of the major points made in the interview.

Summary

This conversation was part of Charity Entrepreneurship's interviews with experts in the field of alcohol control. It covers the following topics:

- IPEN's operating model
- IPEN's role in lead paint regulation
- A new organization working on lead paint regulation
- Countries or regions to focus on
- Barriers to introducing lead paint regulation
- Costs of achieving policy change
- Funding landscape
- New York University study on impact of lead exposure

IPEN's operating model

IPEN is a global network with over 600 partners operating in 126 countries. Each partner is its own organization, with its own operational and governance structures, and participates in IPEN via IPEN's own governance structure. Each of these organizations may work on several issues, but the common thread is a focus on toxic chemicals and their impact on global health and development.

IPEN is a membership-based operation led by members. IPEN's International Secretariat is in Sweden, and there are eight regional hubs based across Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, Eurasia, and the Middle East. The IPEN regional hubs are local/national organizations, who host an IPEN Regional Coordinator that coordinates IPEN members within the regions. The IPEN operation cultivates local/national NGOs

who share the same mission of a toxics-free future for all to advance global health and development issues. Most IPEN members are from low-to-middle income countries, noting IPEN's leadership maintains a regional and gender balance. IPEN members utilize IPEN's name, resources, expertise and network to scale up their work when it is helpful.

IPEN's project/funding budget was around $2.5 million this year, 60-80% of which went directly to partners for projects. Large projects get more consistent funding; smaller projects last year involved 144 activities in 70 different countries, for which IPEN allocated smaller amounts of funding ($500- $5,000). Partner organizations typically work on limited budgets of around $10k-200k per year with a limited number of staff. Many of these groups are run by activists who are highly motivated to protect the health of their local/national communities and environments.

IPEN works with its partner organizations at the local level and brings the findings of this work to the global level, leveraging international aid and expertise to bring about national policy change. The main benefit IPEN brings to its partners are its global network as well as its technical expertise and policy guidance.

IPEN's role in lead paint regulation

IPEN's work on lead paint started in 2008 when it was approached by an IPEN member in India that found high levels of lead in toys on the Indian market. They worked with IPEN to test paint being sold on the market, and found a large percentage had high levels of lead. Considering this could be a global problem, IPEN spent $100,000 on testing in 10 countries, and found lead paint was widely available[1]. They made the case to the international community via a UN policy process linked to UNEP and WHO, and successfully made the case that lead in paint was an emerging global issue. This found agreement in 2009, which then led to the formulation of the UNEP-WHO organized Global Alliance to Eliminate Lead Paint (aka: Lead Paint Alliance).

Since then, IPEN has been leveraging funds from various aid agencies to introduce lead paint regulation, securing funds from EU Aid for activities in Asia, and thereafter from the Global Environment Facility for Lead Paint Elimination Activities in Africa. In addition, IPEN has secured funding to conduct testing and awareness campaigns in other regions. Since then, 21 national policies have been adopted where IPEN has

[1] https://ipen.org/documents/global-study-determine-lead-new-decorative-paints-10-countries

supported its members, which is very difficult to achieve in low- and middle-income countries. To date, IPEN has supported lead paint testing in 55 countries across the globe[2].

A new organization working on lead paint regulation

Björn considered that while there is a serious need to introduce lead paint regulations, and this area is not crowded, in some respects we would be wasting funds by starting a new organization rather than supporting existing ones. He considered the most efficient and effective investment of new resources would be to build on existing momentum and NGOs working to eliminate lead paint, and other toxic pollutants. IPEN has lots of information about which organizations could use additional funding, and could very likely get national policy passed with additional funding. Many of these organizations are run by highly motivated activists running on limited funds; the key bottleneck is funding.

The seed grants that Charity Entrepreneurship are offering to new organizations are substantially higher than the budgets of many existing organizations, which may also create conflict. The conflict can arise when a new, well funded NGO emerges with no history, background, or relationships with groups already working on the issue, as these NGOs tend to need to create their own profile. This can create tension with the underfunded NGO that has been working on the issue for a substantial period of time. Moreover, the new NGO needs to understand the situation, and often asks the other NGO for "help." IPEN has seen this happen on its projects before, and while it has tried to encourage collaboration and sharing financial resources, IPEN cannot control the dynamic on the ground.

Björn considered that starting a new organization may be a good approach in a country where there is currently no activity. In this case, his preferred approach would be for the new organization to identify an individual in that specific country, who IPEN can then bring into the policy conversation and provide technical support to. Individuals identified from the incubation programme could also work, if they have the right skills and are dedicated to the cause. If CE wants to fund them, they can become a member of IPEN and benefit from all the support the other partners receive. Moreover, Björn suggested that Charity Entrepreneurship could consider taking in leaders from existing

[2] https://ipen.org/projects/eliminating-lead-paint

organizations and bringing them through the CE program, where the NGO leader could scale up their professional and entrepreneurial skills.

Overall, IPEN's ideal approach would be for Charity Entrepreneurship and the effective altruism movement more generally to directly fund existing organizations working in this space. IPEN could help identify the organizations that would have the highest chance of creating policy change. Björn considered that consistently funding a group at $25-40k per year would most likely achieve policy change in 2-3 years. The annual investment per NGO is a range, noting it would depend on where each country is currently in the process of moving towards a lead paint regulation. In some countries the cost may be lower, where there is low hanging fruit. In other countries there could be more challenging government engagement and/or NGO capacity issues to consider.

At a global level, the investment needed would be around $12-15 million in total over a 5 year period to achieve the global tipping point to end lead paint production, sales and use, and significantly reduce lead exposure. In comparison to the over $1 trillion per year cost of lead exposure, such funding would be highly leveraged via the IPEN model and network of NGOs and contacts with government authorities and international/UN institutions.

As suggested earlier, Björn considered that another way Charity Entrepreneurship could add significant value is by providing seed funding, training, and mentoring to existing organizations. If this support is given for several years this would enable them to operate at a much higher level. For example, Björn considered a CE seed grant of $100,000 could have a larger impact if it were provided to an existing NGO working on lead paint over a 2-4 year period (ie $50,000 over 2 years; $33,000 over 3 years or $25,000 over 4 years. With IPEN's policy and technical support, this could be a very promising way to achieve policy change. Björn could identify a large number of groups which could be effectively supported in this way.

Many of the existing organizations work on protecting public health and the environment from toxic chemicals more generally. Thus, Björn considered providing multi-year consistent funding would provide substantial indirect benefits to existing organizations that survive mainly off limited 1-2 year project-based support. These NGOs lack consistent financial support and certainty, which impacts their ability to apply entrepreneurial strategic planning to achieve their goals of robust policies to protect human health and the environment. If CE starts a new organization, we should

consider working more broadly at this level, as there are many cost-effective interventions in this space. The "start-up" costs of a new organization both are risky and can be ineffective during the initial period. Similar to hiring new staff, it can take 3-6 months of training, and then 6-12 months before the new staff is fully effective. The same can apply to starting new NGOs, versus investing in existing momentum.

Countries or regions to focus on

IPEN's main criteria if we were to start a new organization to work on lead paint would be to avoid countries where there are already organizations working, to avoid the potential problems discussed above. While IPEN has partners in 126 countries, not all of these work on lead paint, so there are neglected countries. IPEN can help us identify these countries if we take this idea forward.

Barriers to introducing lead paint regulation

There are a number of barriers that make it difficult to achieve legislative change. Legislative change by its nature involves many bureaucratic processes, which slows things down. This is exacerbated in low- and middle-income countries, where governing political parties often change, people move around, and institutional knowledge/memory is weak.

Many low- and middle-income countries have different priorities, where toxic chemical/pollution threats fall between ministries of health and environment. For example, ministries of health usually focus on addressing more immediate health issues rather than on preventative issues such as lead paint. Lead paint can be defined as an industry rather than an environmental issue. Thus it is difficult to get countries to focus on such preventative issues, even though it could be so impactful.

Sometimes the industry can be a barrier as well, as they do not want to change their production model. But IPEN has seen paint manufacturers completely change position over time as they cannot actually justify using lead paint. A dialogue with the industry is therefore necessary, and IPEN has had success in turning the industry to actually promote lead free paint. For example, the President of Pacific Paint, one of the largest paint manufacturers in the Philippines, is an advocate for lead-free paint, and

collaborates closely with IPEN and IPEN's Filipino member[3]. Governments will often listen to business before public health and environmental bodies and NGOs.

Each country is different, however, and involves unique challenges. For example, in Cameroon progress was initially slow, until work with pediatricians found very high lead levels in children. This got significant media attention, which led to the issue moving forward. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, there was a government consultation on the issue within one year, and they moved quickly to create a law.

The key elements of a successful campaign are to generate data, get media attention, and have an actor consistently pushing the issue. This actor should be from an NGO, as government actors sometimes do not have the power or flexibility to consistently advocate for change. But policy change is hard and all the factors listed above will need to be addressed.

Costs of achieving policy change

Some rough costs were discussed already, for example, $25-40k per year for 2-4 years to achieve policy change in some countries. For specific estimates, we can discuss further with IPEN if we take this idea forward.

Funding landscape

Funding is a key bottleneck. Most of IPEN's partner organizations run on limited funds. Given some of the cost-effectiveness estimates, this is quite surprising. There is a perception that lead paint is an old issue which has been resolved, but of course this is not the case in low- and middle-income countries. Partly for this reason it perhaps does not come across as exciting enough for donors. Björn found it very sad how many donors think lead paint is an old issue that has been resolved, and ironic that with just $15 million, global lead paint production could end within a 5 year period. Still funders focus on what their boards are interested in.

New York University study on the impact of lead exposure

The NYU study is a key study which IPEN considers to be very reliable. From their view (and the view of the authors) the estimate of the impact in that study is conservative,

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3 https://www.european-coatings.com/Markets-companies/Coatings-market/Philippine-coatings-industry-wants-to-ban-lead-pigments

because it does not account for several impacts such as health and crime costs to governments and society. The estimate in the paper may also increase over time as populations increase. Björn suggested we speak to the authors for specific information about interpreting the study.