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Production and use of pesticides: an infringement on the rights to food and health

At a time when the general cacophony around glyphosate illustrates the struggle for influence and intensive lobbying organised in Europe around this product whose negative effect on our environment and our health is well proven [\[read\]](#), the very official [European Chemicals Agency](#) (ECHA) declared that glyphosate should not be classified as a carcinogenic substance. It is reminded here that glyphosate is the main active element of Roundup marketed by [Monsanto](#), the most used herbicide worldwide.



ECHA's opinion comes after the view of the [International Agency for Research on Cancer](#) (IARC), which functions within the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), who had declared earlier glyphosate as being probably carcinogenic, and only a few days after the presentation to the UN Human Rights Council by the UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food of a report that stresses the threat represented by the massive use of pesticides (including herbicides) for our environment and our health [\[read the report\]](#).

In her report, the Rapporteur, [Hilal Elver](#), underlines that sales of pesticides are a highly profitable business whose turnover is close to USD 50 billion. It is also a business that is highly concentrated in the hands of a very small number of multinationals [\[read\]](#). Estimates are that the use of pesticides causes every year around 200,000 deaths by acute

poisoning, most of which taking place in poor countries where regulations are more flexible and less complied with. It is also estimated *“that annual acute pesticide poisoning affects nearly 1 in every 5,000 agricultural workers.”* However, people living next to treated plots are also at risk of being exposed. In poor countries, children, who are more sensitive than adults to the effects of pesticides, often take part in farm work and are thus regularly exposed to these toxic products whose effects will only be felt after some time. The author believes that *“reliance on hazardous pesticides is a short-term solution that undermines the rights to adequate food and health for present and future generations.”*

Hilal Elver lists the damages caused by the use of pesticides to the **environment** :

- Pollution of the ecosystem by runoff waters carrying pesticides
- Upsetting of the complex ecosystem balance through elimination of certain living organisms and decreasing biodiversity
- Nitrogen fixation in the soil, which can lead to decline in crop yields.

But scientific research faces a considerable challenge in proving a definitive causal link between the use of pesticides and effect observed. This makes it difficult to justify stricter rules and opens up opportunities for producing multinationals who have adopted very aggressive and often unethical lobbying practices. [\[read\]](#)

From the point of view of **health**, *“pesticide exposure has been linked to cancer, Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases, hormone disruption, developmental disorders and sterility. They can also cause numerous neurological health effects such as memory loss, loss of coordination, reduced visual ability and reduced motor skills. Other possible effects include asthma, allergies and hypersensitivity. These symptoms are often very subtle and may not be recognized by the medical community as a clinical effect caused by pesticides.”*

Risks incurred through exposure to these chemicals affect not only farmers or population groups living near treated areas, but also consumers and particularly children and pregnant women. The Rapporteur provides multiple and well-documented examples of contamination that support her arguments with real cases.

“Exposure to pesticides can have severe impacts on the enjoyment of human rights, in particular the right to adequate food, as well as the right to health. The right to food obligates States to implement protective measures and food safety requirements to ensure that food is safe, free from pesticides and qualitatively adequate. Furthermore, human rights standards require States to protect vulnerable groups, such as farm workers and agricultural communities, children and pregnant women from the impacts of pesticides.”

As a consequence, Hilal Elver’s solution includes *“phasing out dangerous pesticides and enforcing an effective regulatory framework grounded on a human rights approach, coupled with a transition towards sustainable agricultural practices that take into account the challenges of resource scarcity and climate change”*.

The report especially fingers out systemic pesticides and GMOs engineered to produce their pesticide themselves, as they imply a high level of residues in the food products consumed by people. [\[read\]](#)

From a legal point of view, the Rapporteur identifies several interferences between the use of pesticides and human rights instruments. According to her, *“the right to adequate food embraces the notion that its realization must not interfere with the enjoyment of other human rights. Therefore, arguments suggesting that pesticides are needed to safeguard the right to food and food security clash with the right to health, in view of the myriad negative health impacts associated with certain pesticide practices.”* She also notes incoherence with the women’s rights (particularly from the point of view of the safeguarding of the function of reproduction) and children’s rights (especially with respect to specific provisions for protecting children from environmental contaminants and supporting childhood development).

Finally, she raises the issue of the responsibility of corporations and stresses *“the inability of the [human rights] regime to address non-State actors [that] is particularly problematic given that the pesticide industry is dominated by a few transnational corporations that wield extraordinary power over global agrochemical research, legislative initiatives and regulatory agendas.”*

From this point of view, she notes that the (voluntary) [International Code of Conduct on Pesticide Management](#) established by WHO and FAO is being violated by some of the corporations who signed it, in particular Bayer and Syngenta who *“are involved in the manufacturing, distribution and sale of highly hazardous pesticides in violation of the Code.”*

After listing all the difficulties met in the protection against the use of toxic pesticides, the Rapporteur concludes by putting forward ecological agriculture and organic agriculture as solutions for the future and she formulates a series of recommendations to improve the efficacy of the existing protection system.

To know more:

- Hilal Elver, [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food](#), A/HRC/34/48, 2017

Earlier articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- [The European Union and glyphosate: an illustration of one of the principles that govern our society](#), 2016
- [Nano-pesticides: opportunity or new risk?](#), 2015
- [In the US, the industrial food and agriculture sector spent hundreds of millions on communication to influence the media, consumers and policy. What about in Europe?](#), 2015
- [A new generation of GMOs based on the RNA interference technology evades regulation and is likely to flood the US market. What about the rest of the world?](#), 2015
- [Food, Environment and Health](#), 2014
- [The large multinational corporations in charge of our agri-food system...: upstream corporations](#), 2014
- [The decrease in population of bees is a threat for our food](#), 2013.