



**Global Framework on Chemicals –
for a Planet Free of Harm from
Chemicals and Waste**

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**Open-ended Working Group of the
Global Framework on Chemicals – for a
Planet Free of Harm from Chemicals and Waste
First meeting**
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Agenda item 3(e) of the provisional agenda*

Partnership for a Lead-Free Future

Note by the Secretariat

The annex to the present note contains a report on the Partnership for a Lead-Free Future. It is submitted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and is reproduced as received by the secretariat of the Framework.

The present note, including its annex, has not been formally edited.

* UNEP/GFC/OEWG.1/1

Information Relevant to the Open-Ended Working Group on the Global Framework on Chemicals

Submitted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

Title: The Partnership for a Lead-Free Future

Executive Summary

Lead is one of the most potent and widespread neurotoxins affecting children today—and one of the most preventable. Yet around one in three children globally—up to 800 million—have blood lead levels at or above 5 micrograms per decilitre (µg/dL), a threshold that the World Health Organization (WHO) and United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) consider cause for action. The majority of these children live in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where lead exposure remains largely unregulated, often hidden, and highly detrimental to child health and development.

In response, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), together with [global partners](#), has launched the [Partnership for a Lead-Free Future \(PLF\)](#) — the first public-private global partnership aimed at ending childhood lead exposure from all major sources. The PLF builds on proven models of mitigation and leverages growing momentum and political will. It is designed to support country-led action through coordinated policy, investment, and technical assistance, with the goal of safeguarding the rights and well-being of children everywhere.

The Global Burden of Childhood Lead Exposure

Lead is a highly toxic metal that causes irreversible harm to children's brains and bodies. It reduces IQ, impairs attention and behavior, increases the risk of chronic disease, and contributes to poor educational and economic outcomes over a child's lifetime. Even at low levels, lead exposure can have serious and lasting consequences. Prenatal and early life exposure is linked to miscarriage, preterm birth, and low birth weight.

The economic burden is also substantial. According to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, lead exposure contributes to at least 1.5 million deaths annually—more than malaria, tuberculosis, or HIV/AIDS. The World Bank estimates that lead-induced cognitive impairment costs the global economy approximately \$1.4 trillion in lost productivity annually, equivalent to nearly 5% of GDP in LMICs.

Major sources of exposure include informal recycling of lead-acid batteries, lead-contaminated consumer products such as spices, paint, ceramics, and cosmetics, and environmental contamination from industry. In Georgia, a 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) revealed widespread lead exposure in children, prompting comprehensive government action and regulatory reform—a powerful example of how data can drive policy change.

The Role of the Partnership for a Lead-Free Future

The PLF was launched during the UN General Assembly high-level week in September 2024 in response to a growing recognition of the need for stronger and more coordinated global action. Hosted by UNICEF and aligned with the [UNEP/WHO Global Alliance to Eliminate Lead Paint](#), the PLF is designed to serve as a platform for:

- Supporting country-led assessments and action to identify and eliminate lead sources;
- Facilitating multisectoral partnerships and investments;
- Promoting the adoption of effective regulatory frameworks;
- Strengthening capacity, awareness, and monitoring systems.

The PLF includes participation from over 30 countries, 21 civil society organizations, 6 multilateral agencies, and 11 foundations and private sector partners. It complements and builds upon existing initiatives, offering a shared mechanism to mobilize global commitment, technical expertise, and resources.

The Importance of Timely Action

The 2020 publication of *The Toxic Truth*, a joint report by UNICEF and Pure Earth, brought international visibility to the scale and urgency of childhood lead poisoning. The report revealed that lead poisoning is a silent epidemic affecting one in three children globally. Since then, UNICEF has taken a leading role in raising awareness and supporting governments to translate evidence into action.

Despite its scale, childhood lead poisoning receives limited attention and resourcing. Global investments historically amount to less than \$15 million per year—with the launch of the PLF announcing \$150 million in new investments in lead programming and dramatically increasing attention to the issue. However, the tools to address the crisis are known, effective, and cost-efficient. Lessons from the successful global elimination of leaded petrol underscore the feasibility of coordinated action.

The PLF, through the inputs of its partners, provides a [ready toolkit](#) for governments, development partners, and the private sector to align efforts and accelerate progress toward a lead-free future. It also complements broader efforts under the Global Framework on Chemicals and Children's Environmental Health Collaborative co-founded by UNICEF, UNEP and World Bank.

Call to Action

UNICEF invites Member States and stakeholders to join the Partnership for a Lead-Free Future. Membership is voluntary and non-binding, offering access to technical support, shared learning, and a platform for coordinated global leadership.

Participating countries are encouraged to designate national lead focal points, engage in peer learning, and develop or enhance national action plans. Together, we can take the steps necessary to eliminate childhood lead exposure and protect every child's right to grow up in a healthy, safe environment.

References

UNICEF and Pure Earth. (2020). *The Toxic Truth: Children's Exposure to Lead Pollution Undermines a Generation of Potential*.

Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. (2019). *Global Burden of Disease*.

World Bank. (2021). *The Global Cost of Lead Exposure in Children: A Call to Action*.

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