

## Session V Environment and Sustainability

### Indigenous Peoples' Vulnerabilities Exposed: Lessons Learnt from Canada's *Minamata* Incident : An Environmental Historical Analysis of Environmental Policy Formulation and Implementation based on the Case Study of Methyl-mercury Pollution in Northwestern Ontario, Canada

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On March 26, 1970 the Ontario provincial government presented Dryden Chemical Company with an ordinance ordering the company to cease dumping mercury into the English-Wabigoon river system. It was estimated that Dryden Chemical, a subsidiary of the British-owned Kent-based multinational corporation Reed International, had dumped 20,000 pounds of mercury into the river system between 1962, the year the chlor-alkali plant began production on the grounds of the parent company's pulp and paper factory, and the time the ordinance was issued in March 1970. The ordinance was directed only at water effluents and neglected air emissions. Airborne mercury pollution thus continued until October 1975, the date when Dryden Chemical switched from using mercury cells, the source of the mercury pollution, to a cleaner system of chlor-alkali manufacturing. The following year Dryden Chemical ceased all existing operations.

At the time of the ordinance, both federal and provincial governments ignored the potential threats to the human health of the indigenous communities residing along the English-Wabigoon river system, claiming the dangers were isolated to the natural environment. Pressures, both internal and external, on government to review the potential dangers to human health ensued. In December 1978, eight years following the ordinance served to Dryden Chemical, the Ojibwa communities of White Dog and Grassy Narrows signed a memorandum of understanding with the federal and provincial governments to negotiate a compensation package for adverse environmental, health and economic impacts incurred. In 1985 an agreement was reached.

The Northwestern Ontario case of methyl-mercury pollution has often been referred to as "The Love Canal of Canada". It was an unprecedented case that has left its mark on Canadian environmental policy and indigenous communities' efforts to assert their rights for environmental protection and restitution and/or compensation for adverse impacts incurred by environmental pollution.

Although geographically isolated to Canadian borders, it is interesting to note that external forces played a vital role from the beginning of this environmental health issue. The researcher who alerted government officials to the dangers of methyl-mercury pollution by chlor-alkali plants in Ontario was from Norway. Researchers from Japan, specifically medical researchers, pressured the Canadian government to re-review the possibility of adverse impacts on human health among the Ojibwa communities living along the polluted river system. One could argue that the interplay among internal and external forces – polluter, those polluted, researchers, government and media from within Canada and abroad, represent one phase in the globalization of environmental movements and policy during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically that of multi-stakeholder interactions which evolve across borders, influencing policy formulation and actions taken by the different stakeholders involved on local, national and international levels.

In reviewing this case study of methyl-mercury pollution, of interest are the interactions among multi-stakeholders which expose the vulnerabilities of the impacted indigenous communities. And once vulnerabilities are exposed, how are these manipulated by the different stakeholders involved to effect policy formulation and implementation within the impacted communities, as well as on provincial, national and international levels. In reviewing this intricate interplay among stakeholders, this environmental historical analysis aims to shed light on the legacies, both nationally and internationally, of Canada's *Minamata* Incident.