

# ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH IN AFRICA

## ***Anti-asbestos legislation in Africa: From Regulatory Illusion to Scientific Sovereignty***

By K. Ambroise TROVEH.

On the scale of the African continent, the rise of urbanization, the extension of infrastructure networks and the densification of the construction sector testify to an unprecedented development dynamic. However, this growth trajectory is accompanied by major challenges in environmental and public health. Among these issues, the asbestos issue remains critical, characterized by a systematic underestimation of the risks despite a documented international health consensus.

A crucial awareness was raised at the ***Asbestonomy 2024 conference in Madrid***, marked by the historic participation of the pan-African OSHAfrica foundation. For the first time on this international stage, Africa's voice was expressed in a unified way to expose the continental realities of the asbestos risk. This intervention highlighted a persistent reality: asbestos remains structurally present in the buildings, water distribution networks, school infrastructures and former industrial sites, among others, of several African nations.

### ***The paradox of the great regulatory gap.***

The main obstacle to effective prevention in Africa no longer lies solely in the absence of legal frameworks, but in an institutional paradox: the major gap between the promulgation of prohibitive texts and the absence of enforcement and monitoring mechanisms on the ground.

OSHAfrica's work and initiatives have notably contributed to the emergence of the first empirical study on asbestos in Togo, which we coordinated with the official authorization of the Ministry of Environment and Forest Resources. Togo is a textbook case in this respect: the country officially banned the use of asbestos in all construction material in 1997. However, the indicators in our report published in April 2025 reveal that an overwhelming majority of the population has no knowledge of this substance, nor of the serious and fatal lung pathologies linked to the inhalation of its fibres. This Togolese observation, if it is currently the only one to be objectified by data from recent studies, highlights a systemic dynamic that can be transposed to other states on the continent. Prohibition laws, when they are not backed by adequate environmental monitoring structures or active awareness-

raising policies, are confined to a purely theoretical existence.

***This perception deficit is also accentuated by language barriers, as the very term "asbestos" has no semantic equivalent in many local languages, which neutralizes the dissemination of preventive information.***

### **Structural vulnerability to global markets**

This lack of operational control weakens the continent in the face of international trade flows. While asbestos removal policies are becoming more widespread in the countries of the North, some industrial powers are continuing to produce and export asbestos materials at low cost. For developing economies under severe budgetary constraints, access to these cheap materials represents a deleterious economic trade-off. *In the absence of analytical tools at the borders and inspection protocols on construction sites, African markets remain receptive to these risky imports.*

This situation is in addition to a heavy historical history, inherited from mining or the intensive use of this fiber in the past in countries such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Algeria or Egypt.

### **Towards a pooling of expertise: CIERA's approach**

Faced with the inadequacy of centralized data and the cruel lack of specialized laboratories on the continent, it seems imperative to go beyond the framework of national initiatives alone. Africa cannot depend on exogenous expertise for the

long term to assess and map its own health risks.

It is precisely to respond to this structural deficit, and in the continuity of continental awareness-raising efforts, that the ***CIERA (Inter-African Committee of Asbestos Experts) was initiated***. The objective of this organization is not to replace the prerogatives of the state, but to offer a common technical and scientific platform. In the long term, the development of a network of correspondents and experts at the regional level should make it possible to:

- ***Standardize and make reliable the feedback of factual data and technical diagnoses directly from the different national contexts.***

- ***Transfer and consolidate cutting-edge scientific skills on African soil, particularly in metrology and fine analysis (transmission electron microscopy).***

- ***Support institutional decision-makers in the transition from principled legislation to enforceable action plans, including epidemiological surveillance and information campaigns adapted to sociolinguistic realities.*** Africa's economic emergence and the modernization of its infrastructure cannot be achieved at the expense of the health of its populations. For the environmental transition to be effective, the continent must acquire its scientific and technical sovereignty. The challenge is no longer just to legislate, but to deploy the control tools that are essential to the protection of future generations.

## Sources and references

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