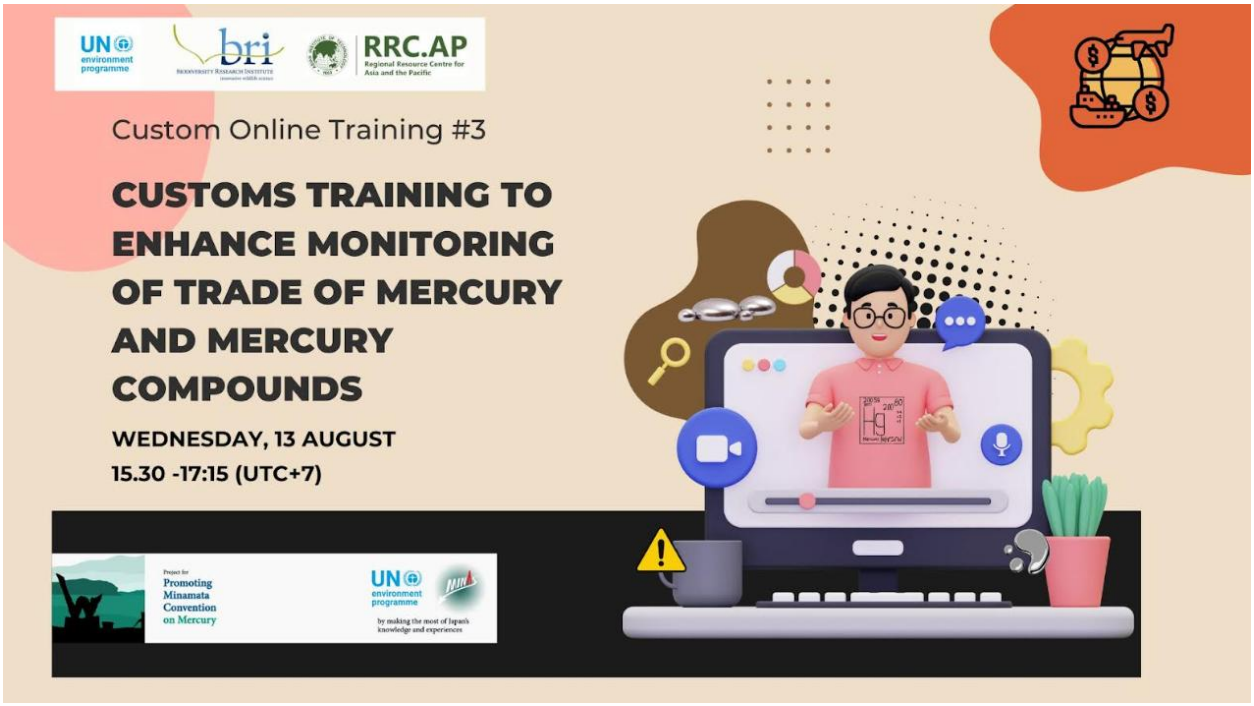
Project for Promoting Minamata Convention on Mercury by making the most of Japan's knowledge and experiences

Proceeding report

Custom Online Training 3

Custom Online Training to Enhance Monitoring of Trade of Mercury and Mercury Compounds

13 August 2025 (Online)



Prepared by:

Ashley Bastiansz, Biodiversity Research Institute (BRI)

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Background and Objectives

The **Online Custom Training on Monitoring the Trade of Mercury and Mercury Compounds**, held on **13 August 2025**, is part of a broader effort to build national capacity in support of the **Minamata Convention on Mercury**. The Convention is a key multilateral environmental agreement aimed at protecting human health and the environment from anthropogenic emissions and releases of mercury and mercury compounds.

This training is organized under the **Japan-funded United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) project** titled *"Project for Promoting the Minamata Convention on Mercury by Making the Most of Japan's Knowledge and Experiences."* The project seeks to strengthen implementation by facilitating **information exchange, awareness-raising, education, and technical capacity building** among participating countries.

Specifically, this session focused on **Best Practices/Available Resources for Managing Mercury Trade** and targeted **customs authorities, ministries of environment and health**, and other relevant stakeholders, with the goal of enhancing their understanding and practical ability to monitor and control mercury trade. By bringing together legal, technical, and enforcement perspectives, the training provided participants with an integrated view of the mercury trade landscape — covering:

- Managing Mercury Trade
- Legislative and Institutional Strengthening Needs for Improved Mercury Trade Management
- Harmonized System (HS) Codes for Improved Mercury Trade Monitoring
- Controlling Mercury Trade

This training is the **third (final) of a three-part online webinar series**, designed to complement in-person workshops and deepen stakeholder engagement across Asia and the Pacific.

Participation Details

A total of **41 participants** joined the *Online Custom Training on Monitoring the Trade of Mercury and Mercury Compounds* held on 13 August 2025. The participants represented a diverse mix of sectors and countries, aligning well with the training's goal of engaging both customs and environmental stakeholders.

Geographic Representation

The training drew participation from a wide range of countries, demonstrating broad regional interest and engagement on the topic of mercury trade monitoring. The top five countries by number of participants *based on registration* were Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, Philippines, highlighting a strong subregional presence from South and Southeast Asia, and Africa.

Institutional Background

Attendees represented a wide range of institutions, *list descending*:

- Government agencies
- Academia/Research institutions
- Other sectors (including NGOs and private sector)
- UN or International organizations

Gender Representation

The gender distribution among participants *based on registration* was as follows:

- Male – 36 participants
- Female – 46 participants
- Prefer not to say

Opening Remarks

The training session began with opening remarks from **Mr. Thomas Verbaere**, Programme Management Officer at the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**. He opened the session by welcoming participants to the third and final session of the webinar on behalf of UNEP. He highlighted the lessons learned over the previous two online sessions and the exploration of the global supply and demand of mercury, informal trade, and the implications on human and environmental health. He also touched the importance of participants' engagement, cross sectoral dialogue, and the importance of cross- and inter-agency collaboration, which are vital in helping Parties meeting the obligations of the Minamata Convention. He encouraged participants to active contribute during this final webinar and share experiences from their own context that can be carried forward beyond this series.

Dr. Guilberto Borongan, AIT-RRCAP

This was followed by warm welcoming remarks from **Dr. Guilberto Borongan**, Director of the **Asian Institute of Technology – Regional Resource Centre for Asia and the Pacific (AIT RRC.AP)**.

Dr. Guilberto warmly welcomed everyone to the final session of the "Custom Online Training to Enhance Monitoring of Trade of Mercury and Mercury Compounds." He extended sincere thanks on behalf of UNEP and its partners to all participants for their involvement. He emphasized the broader global effort to strengthen oversight of mercury trade and explained that today's webinar would focus on key lessons learned, customs operations, HS codes, interagency coordination, legal enforcement, and strategies to address challenges in mercury trade. Dr. Guilberto highlighted critical areas where enforcement systems currently fall short and expressed his delight in having such a dedicated group present, wishing everyone a productive and engaging learning experience.

Housekeeping and Session Orientation

The housekeeping and session orientation segment was delivered by **Mr. Bishal Bhari**, Programme Officer at **AIT RRC.AP**, who also served as the session moderator.

Participants were welcomed and given essential technical and engagement guidelines to help ensure a smooth, interactive online experience. These included reminders on how to use the chat and Q&A features, information about the recording of the session, and details on resources that would be shared following the event.

Mr. Bhari emphasized the importance of a respectful and inclusive engagement throughout the second training and encouraged participants to actively engage with the expert speakers. A brief overview of the day's agenda was then provided, outlining the thematic segments, introducing the speakers with short bios and presentation topics, and highlighting the planned Q&A sessions. To foster a relaxed and welcoming virtual environment, the moderator used light humor and informal interaction, helping participants feel more at ease and engaged from the outset.

Mr. Bishal Bhari (AIT-RRCAP) providing housekeeping rules and session orientation

Presentation 1: Overview of National Training Activities conducted in Sri Lanka, Mongolia and Palau

The first session was presented by **Ms. Ashley Bastiansz** from the **Biodiversity Research Institute (BRI)**. Her presentation provided an **Overview of National Training Activities conducted in Sri Lanka, Mongolia and Palau.**

She started off by providing a high-level summary of the Japan-funded project aimed at promoting the implementation of the Minamata Convention on Mercury regionally implemented by UNEP and co-executed by AIT and BRI. This initiative leveraged Japan's knowledge and experience to support participating countries in strengthening their capacity to manage mercury trade and enforce Convention obligations. The workshops provided a comprehensive program that included technical training, practical exercises, and policy discussions, with a strong focus on enhancing interagency coordination. In-person National Trainings were held in Sri Lanka (2 June 2025), Palau (17 June 2025), and Mongolia (23–24 June 2025), bringing together key national stakeholders to advance mercury control efforts at the national level.

Ms. Bastiansz mentioned that across all three in-person National Trainings, presentations were delivered on the following items:

- **Scientific & Policy Context**: Review of Human Health Impacts of Mercury, Minamata Convention Obligations on Mercury Trade and Mercury Mass Flow Analysis
- **Institutional Roles & Coordination**: Role of Customs in Minamata Convention implementation and Overview of available tools and resources
- **National Institutional Capacity**: Exploring cross-agency collaboration among Customs, environmental agencies, and law enforcement
- **Practical & Technical Training**: Customs inspection procedures and profiling including case studies on smuggling and interception, mercury detection and forensic analysis techniques
- **Strategic Planning**: Developing National Action Plans and SOPs for enforcement and regulatory agencies

She then presented a more detailed table showing the different categories that were presented as well as the differences and similarities in their trainings.

Category	Sri Lanka	Mongolia	Palau
Country-Specific Focus	Mercury mass flow in Sri Lanka	Mercury mass flow in Mongolia	Mercury mass flow in Palau
Experiences with other national projects	UNDP POPs project	ASGM experience (PlanetGOLD); Indonesia case study	Mercury-added product phase-out
Mercury Products in Trade	Focus on mercury-added skin lightening products (SLPs)	No specific product type emphasized	Focus on identifying mercury-added products (MAPs) (broader scope)
Human Health Focus	Health impacts discussed focused on use of SLPs	General health impacts + XRF risk-assessment	Emphasis on biomonitoring (hair sampling) and Pacific regional context
Waste Management	Disposal capacity discussed (gaps highlighted)	Dedicated session on mercury waste handling and disposal	Overview of national handling, storage, disposal systems
Customs Capacity	Practical exercises in shipment profiling and smuggling tactics	Similar customs training + simulated joint operation planning	Training on hazardous substance identification, confiscation, and export
Enforcement Simulation	Practical inspection exercises	Group activity: plan and simulate joint enforcement operation	Exercise: Developing national action plans for mercury phase-out
Cross-Agency Collaboration	General emphasis on stakeholder cooperation	Detailed protocols: joint ops, info-sharing, enforcement SOPs	Highlighted SOPs session
Regional/International Case Studies	Other countries dealing with mercury-added SLPs	Indonesia's experience shared	Regional context in Pacific Islands highlighted in discussion

She discussed that countries had the same overall training experience and presentations; however, certain materials were tailored to the specific needs of each country: (1) Sri Lanka –focus of mercury-added SLPs; (2) Mongolia – focus on ASGM; and (3) Palau – identifying MAPs. It was highlighted that all three countries shared a similar issue with mercury waste management – only Mongolia has a storage facility however they are not permitted to add new mercury waste, additionally all three countries shared the same limitations with Customs' capacity

Ms. Bastiansz then segued into the key takeaways from each of the countries National Trainings. Helped deepen understanding of mercury-related issues especially related to mercury-added SLPs. She started with Sri Lanka, where participants clearly recognized the importance of monitoring mercury trade, and that this training reinforced their role in the Minamata Convention. She also highlighted that the participants in Sri Lanka expressed the strong need for ongoing collaboration with national stakeholders to stay informed on mercury issues. Lastly, participants from Sri Lanka pointed out that institutional capacity for enforcement must be enhanced through training and partnerships.

In Mongolia, participants gained a deeper understanding of the Minamata Convention, with strong emphasis on regulatory compliance, interagency coordination, and mercury management. There was particular interest in mercury monitoring, storage, and disposal—especially in the context of ASGM. Discussions on international instruments were highly relevant, and participants expressed a clear desire for further training, long-term capacity building, and exploring the development of a dedicated mercury storage facility.

In Palau, Customs officials found the workshop valuable for understanding mercury trade challenges and improving monitoring efforts. Both Customs and the Environmental Quality Protection Board (EQPB) raised concerns about limited storage space for prohibited items and inadequate disposal infrastructure. Participants highlighted broader constraints, including lack of funding for hazardous material management and absence of lab equipment to test MAPs at entry points. Additionally, Customs faces difficulties returning prohibited goods, as exporters often deny ownership or claim items are counterfeit.

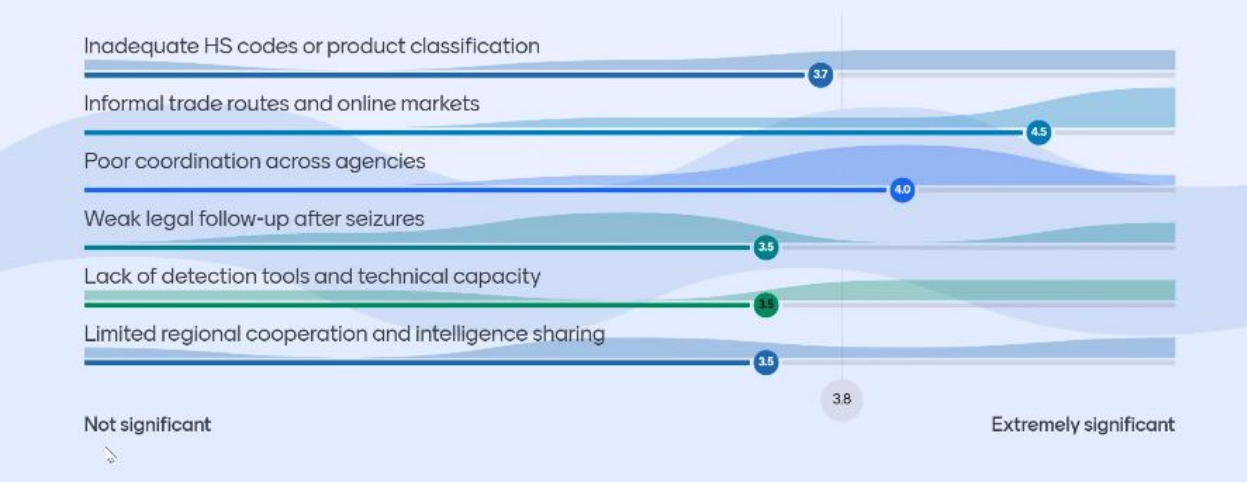
Ms. Bastiansz concluded her presentation with a short Q&A discussion.

Panel Discussion

Following Ms. Bastiansz's presentation, a panel discussion was moderated by Mr. Bishal Bhari (AIT) with panelists Ms. Anna Kobleckya (WCO), Ms. Chalani Rubesinghe (WHO Sri Lanka Office), Dr. Guilberto Borongan (AIT), and Mr. Kyaw Nyunt Maung (UNEP) to discuss prominent questions from the previous trainings.

Mr. Bhari started the panel discussion with a mentimeter exercise by asking participants "what is the biggest barrier to effective mercury trade enforcement in your country?" Participants used the application to respond and mentioned collaboration, procedure, evidentiary issues, lack of expertise, low priority, specialized training, and regulation as barriers to effective mercury trade enforcement.

The second question Mr. Bhari asked participants on mentimeter was "How significant are the following challenges to mercury trade enforcement in your country?" Participants responded the following:



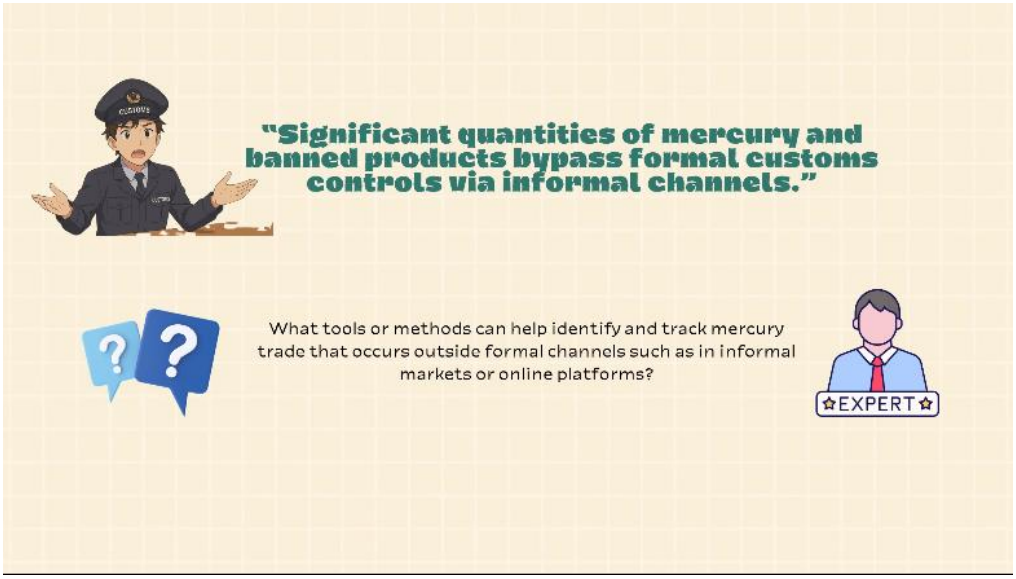
Leading into the panel discussion, Mr. Bhari highlighted some of the key challenges previously highlighted in both the in-person and online trainings which included difficulty in detection, fragmented inter-agency collaboration, legal framework enforcement, lack of capacity and co-operation, lack of specific HS codes, weak inter-agency effort, weak follow-through on seizures, and informal trade.

Panel discussion Q&A with experts

Question 1 – Addressed to Mr. Kyaw Nyunt Maung (UNEP)

Mr. Maung pointed out that a key challenge raised—both in the sub-regional workshop and at the national level—is the limitation of the 6-digit HS code system in identifying mercury-added products. He emphasized that to enhance tracking, countries (e.g., those in ASEAN and Uruguay) have developed national-level codes beyond 6 digits. However, this requires strong interagency collaboration, which is currently limited in some countries. A proposal at COP4 outlined three possible approaches to extending HS codes, but national-level action—particularly by Customs agencies—may be faster and more effective in the short term.

Question 2 – Addressed to Ms. Anna Kobleckya (WCO) and Ms. Chalani Rubesinghe (WHO)



Ms. Kobleckya started off the discussion by reinforcing that Customs agencies require a clear legal framework and mandate to effectively identify an act on banned or prohibited products. This includes the authority to conduct surveillance, particularly in the context of online trade, and access to data on the scale and nature of illegal imports. To take targeted action, Ms. Kobleckya articulated that Customs must have (1) A defined role and legal basis to respond to prohibited goods; (2) Clear product identifiers (e.g., names, categories) to aid detection; (3) Collaboration with online platforms to address digital trade channels; and (4) A risk management approach informed by reliable data on illicit trade. She concluded by stressing that without this foundation, enforcement efforts remain limited and reactive.

Ms. Rubesinghe followed Ms. Kobleckya by drawing attention to Sri Lanka and the present voluntary measures used to promote safer products online. However, Ms. Rubesinghe underscored that stronger enforcement models exist—Amazon, for example, requires cosmetics sellers to comply with safety standards, including mercury restrictions. She then mentioned the local regulatory oversight that involves National Medicines Regulatory Authority (NMRA) registration and licensing through Sri Lanka Standards Institution (SLSI) for cosmetics, and the fact that Customs playing a key enforcement role, but they reliant on data-sharing from other agencies. She then discussed the need to formally identify mercury and related loopholes as restricted substances as the Sri Lanka Consumer Affairs Authority (CAA) conducts market testing and holds regulatory authority, but consumer focus tends to be on product results rather than safety compliance. Ms. Rubsinghe concluded by placing importance on stronger interagency coordination and clear mandates, which are essential for effective regulation, especially in the growing online trade of SLPs.

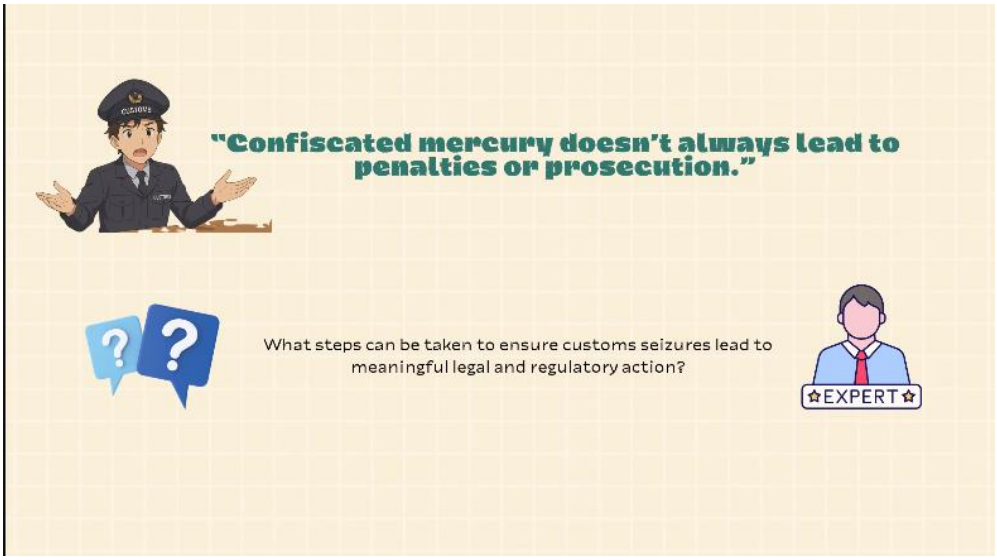
Question 3 – Addressed to Ms. Anna Kobleckya (WCO) and Ms. Chalani Rubesinghe (WHO)

Ms. Rubesinghe started off the discussion for the third question by affirming that effective regulation of hazardous products, including mercury-containing items, relies on strong interagency collaboration—particularly between health, environment, and customs authorities. She pointed out key points elements including the critical importance of joint enforcement because when health or environmental risks are identified, agencies must coordinate with Customs to ensure bans are enforced. Another key element pointed out was the shared database or platform which can reduce duplication—for example, if Customs already has a flagged product list, re-testing can be avoided, reducing both time and economic burden. She also highlighted the importance of Customs officers' participation in interagency meetings to better understand the public health and environmental rationale behind restrictions. Lastly, she reinforced the frequently raised point surrounding the need for testing facilities at border points, along with the importance of SLSI compliance, as well as collaboration with academic institutions that have the necessary laboratory infrastructure which can improve efficiency and fill capacity gaps. She made it clear that building integrated systems and sharing responsibilities across sectors will strengthen national enforcement and improve regulatory outcomes.

Ms. Kobylecka finished the discussion of this question by reemphasizing that controlling the trade of mercury is a shared responsibility that requires coordinated action across multiple agencies. Customs authorities play a critical frontline role, acting as the first line of defense against the illegal movement of mercury and mercury-added products. However, for collaboration to be effective, it must be backed by clear legislation that provides each agency with the legal mandate to act. She stated that at the national level, roles must be clearly defined—particularly regarding responsibilities for storage, testing, and prosecution.

While the WCO does not currently provide mercury-specific standard operating procedures (SOPs), its existing guidance on hazardous waste can be adapted for this purpose. At the regional level, WCO can support enforcement through its Regional Intelligence Liaison Offices, which Customs agencies are already familiar with. To conclude, Ms. Kobylecka made it clear that establishing strong legal and operational frameworks both nationally and regionally is essential to ensure effective control of mercury trade.

Question 4 – Addressed to Ms. Anna Kobylecka (WCO)



Ms. Kobylecka outlined three key stages in regulatory case development: detection, seizure/handling, and evidence management. A crucial need is to identify high-risk commodities, especially those not clearly listed as restricted products. Customs should develop detailed risk profiles in collaboration with other relevant authorities to guide their approach. Customs officers must be trained on how to handle these commodities safely, including the proper use of PPE, and know when to engage with competent authorities. When a seizure occurs, clear protocols are needed on whether Customs should transfer the items to environmental or other agencies, and what information must be documented to maintain the chain of custody for prosecution. Ms. Kobylecka concluded by emphasizing that, national procedures should ultimately be established through cooperation between Customs and competent authorities to ensure effective management and enforcement throughout the entire process.

Question 5 – Dr. Guilberto Borongan (AIT)

Dr. Guilberto emphasized the importance of active regional enforcement collaboration, referencing initiatives like the Bali Declaration, ASEAN working group, and the Sri Lanka workshop. He urged countries to join forces to combat transnational smuggling and share intelligence, while holding authorities accountable through regular tracking of progress via trainings and enforcement update platforms. Promoting healthy competition can motivate proper action. Dr. Guilberto also highlighted the need for more regional workshops offering onsite training and called for investment in improved laboratory facilities with specialized mercury testing capabilities. Recognizing that many countries face similar challenges, he suggested regional lab sharing to maximize resources and support enforcement across borders.

A participant in the chat wrote that in Sri Lanka, there is currently insufficient legal framework to regulate mercury-containing products, such as whitening creams, due to the absence of a specific cosmetics law. Ms. Rubesinghe address this comment by confirming that indeed no dedicated agency oversees this issue, with only the CAA having limited authority. While the CAA can remove such products from the market and pursue legal action, these actions are restricted to specific regions and do not extend nationwide.

Closing Remarks

The training concluded with closing remarks delivered by **Mr. Thomas Verbaere**, Programme Management Officer at the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)**. As the webinar and project comes to a close, Mr. Verbaere thanked the panelists and participants for their active involvement. He emphasized the shared commitment of government authorities and technical experts to combat mercury trade. The efforts made so far serve not as an endpoint but as a strong foundation to guide future policy and actions. UNEP remains dedicated to supporting ongoing capacity building and fostering dialogue. He expressed sincere gratitude to all for their contributions toward protecting human health and the environment.

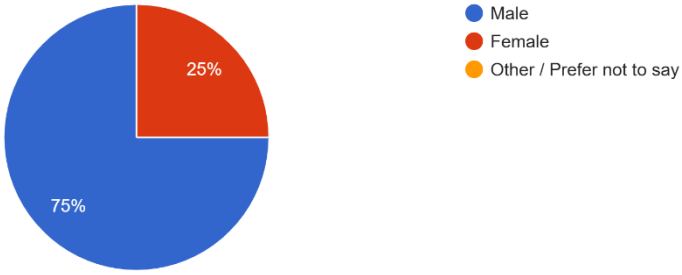
Participant Feedback

Post-Training Survey

Section 1: Participant Information

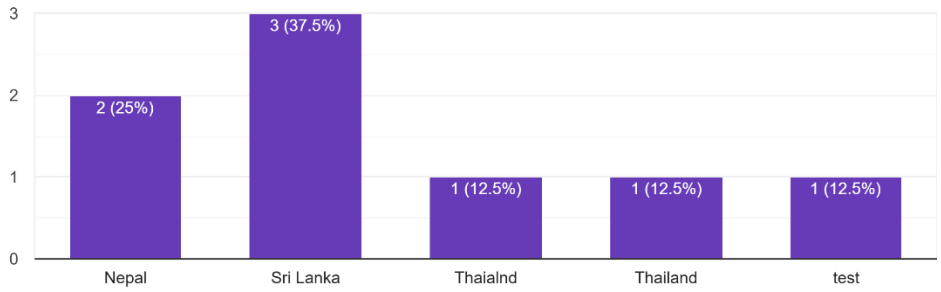
1. Gender

8 responses



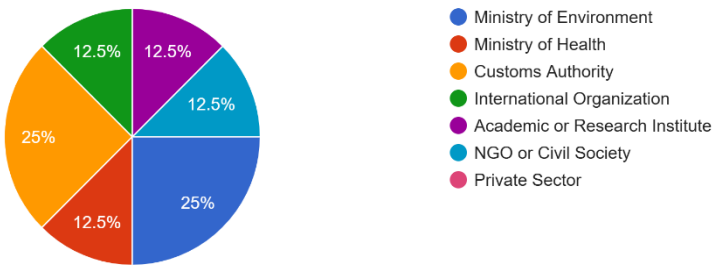
2. Country

8 responses



3. Organization Type (Please select one)

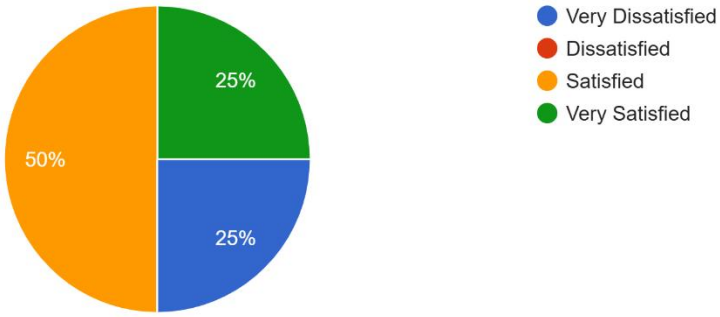
8 responses



Section 2: Course Satisfaction and Content Evaluation

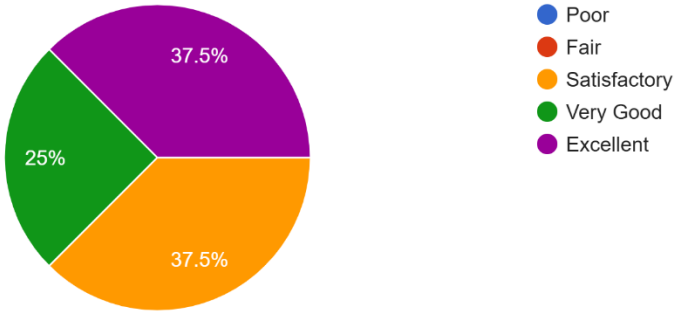
4. Overall, how satisfied are you with this training session?

8 responses



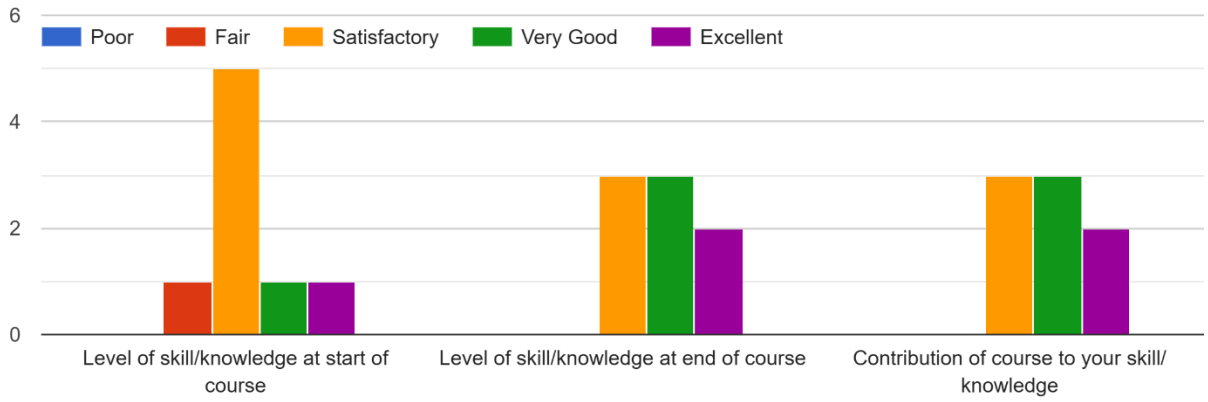
5. How would you rate your level of preparation for the course?

8 responses



Section 3: Knowledge Acquisition and Contribution to Learning

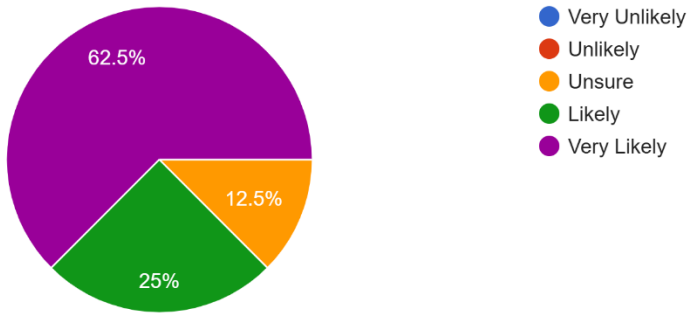
6. Skill and Knowledge Assessment (Mark one option per row)



Section 4: Application and Relevance

7. How likely are you to apply the knowledge and techniques learned during this training to your current work?

8 responses



Section 5: Additional Feedback

Most valuable takeaways from the training included:

- Strategies to reduce mercury use in society
- Awareness of illegal mercury trade
- Importance of passing on a mercury-free society to future generations
- Benefits of using national-level HS Classification for statistical purposes

Additional comments or suggestions for improving future training courses:

- Please arrange the training in a physical form as much as possible.
- Training with action plans for each country and with targets with timelines.

Annex 1: Concept Note and Program Agenda

Project for
Promoting
Minamata
Convention
on Mercury

UN environment programme

by making the most of Japan's knowledge and experiences

Online Custom Training #3

Customs Training to Enhance Monitoring of Trade of Mercury and Mercury Compounds

13th of August 2025

Concept Note and Program Agenda

Background and Objectives

Minamata Convention on Mercury (the Convention) is one of the newest multilateral environmental agreements aiming at protecting human health and environment from anthropogenic emissions and release of mercury and mercury compounds. There has been a growing need for capacity building concerning appropriate mercury monitoring skills in developing countries to ensure the implementation of the required efforts to monitor the levels of mercury and mercury compounds.

United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is implementing a Japan-funded project called "Project for promoting the Minamata Convention on Mercury by making the most of Japan's knowledge and experiences[1]" to support its member states for the implementation of the Convention. The project has a special focus on the area of information exchange, awareness and education, research, development, and monitoring. A comprehensive programme was designed to strengthen enabling capacity, build on the resources in and around Minamata, and employ technologies held by institutions in Japan for the effective implementation of the Convention's obligations.

In addition to the in-person workshop planned, kindly note that national stakeholders will also be invited to participate in a series of online training sessions to be held tentatively from May to August

2025. These brief online webinars will provide key context to the issues related to mercury, global mercury trade and the obligations of the Minamata Convention on Mercury. Attendees of all sessions will receive a Certificate of Participation.

Participation Details

Date	Thursday 13th of August 2025
Time	15:30 – 17:15 (UTC+7)
Registration	Please register for the webinar from the link or QR-code below:
	Click Here to Register
Venue	Virtual (Webex); Meeting Link will be sent to the previously registered participant.
Project title	Project for Promoting Minamata Convention on Mercury by making the most of Japan's knowledge and experiences.
Webinar title	Customs Training to Enhance Monitoring of Trade of Mercury, Mercury Compounds
Participants	Ministries of Environment, Ministries of Health and Custom Authorities.
Language	English only (no interpretation provided)
Contact	japanmercuryproject@un.org; warm@rrcap.ait.ac.th
Project web	Click Here

Programme Agenda

Online Custom Training #3 will focus on Lessons Learnt in Trainings on Managing Mercury Trade. Detail agenda is as follows:

15:30-15:35	Opening Remarks	Thomas Verbaere, UNEP Guilberto Borongan, AIT RRC.AP
15:35-15:40	Housekeeping Announcement	Bishal Bhari, AIT RRCAP
15:40-16:10	Overview of National Training Activities conducted in Sri Lanka, Mongolia and Palau Sri Lanka, Mongolia, & Palau - key takeaways in managing mercury and mercury-added products	Ashley Basitansz, BRI
16:10 – 16:15	Health Break	
16:15-17:00	Panel Discussion: Tracking the Unseen: Improving Detection, Coordination, and Action Against Mercury Trade	Panel: Anna Ewa Kobylecka, World Custom Organization (WCO) Guilberto Borongan, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) Chalani Rubesinghe, World Health Organization – Sri Lanka (WHO) Kyaw Nyunt Maung, United Nation Environmental Program (UNEP) Moderator: Bishal Bhari, AIT-RRCAP
17:00-17:10	Q&A	Facilitated By: Ashley Bastiansz (BRI)
17:10-17:15	Closing Remark	Thomas Verbaere, UNEP