# Senegal battery recycling

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Following the death of 18 children in Thiaroye-sur-Mer, investigating authorities identified lead poisoning from local recycling of discarded car batteries as the silent threat stalking the seaside community.

The document outlines the process of recycling used lead-acid batteries and describes how lead exposure can occur. Three case studies illustrate the impact that uncontrolled battery recycling can have on a community. The document then discusses the adverse health impacts resulting from exposure to lead. An overview

At the time, the main economic activity in the town was the informal recycling of used lead-acid car batteries, which involved the haphazard melting of car batteries to reclaim the scrap lead inside. Often done in open-air settings, the unregulated recycling exposed some 40,000 people to lead dust.

Between November 2007 and March 2008, 18 children died from a rapidly progressive central nervous system disease of unexplained origin in a community involved in the recycling of used lead-acid batteries (ULAB) in the suburbs of Dakar, Senegal. We investigated the cause of these deaths.

Since 1995, local people had broken apart batteries from vehicles and appliances and sorted the components in an open sandy area of the neighbhorhood. They sifted through the sand for scraps of valuable lead to sell, even carrying sacks of contaminated sand into their homes.

The world well remembers the innocent children killed in the tragedy of Thiaroye-sur-Mer in Senegal. The killer not only took the lives of people, but destroyed wildlife and the environment. But rather than war or natural disaster, in 2008 lead was to blame.

Lead is a well-known toxic substance with wide-ranging negative health effects. Studies have shown that high blood lead levels lead to reduced IQ, hearing loss, hyperactivity, shortened concentration span and poor school performance in children.

"Lead from used batteries is a major issue in Africa. When lead is recycled in an unsafe environment, it can affect children and pregnant women," says Percy Onainwa, Executive Director, Center for Cleaner Production Technology and Hazardous Waste Management, Nigeria.

"We have seen cases of lead poisoning in various countries in Africa - such as Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal. The poisoning has killed children, and affected soil, water and the atmosphere."

Lead-acid batteries are widely used in Africa to power everything from cars to telecommunication equipment to backup electrical systems. But when these batteries reach the end of their life, efforts to recycle their lead cores causes widespread environmental contamination.

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"Lead is considered to be the workhorse of the rechargeable battery systems for its reliability, low cost, and good operational life," says UN Environment Chemical and Waste Management Coordinator Abdourahmane Bary. "But inappropriate recycling of used batteries in many African countries poses a high risk for both human health and the environment."

Representatives from ten African countries gathered in Ougadougou from July 19-21 to discuss the environmental, health and socio-economic impacts of used lead-acid battery (ULAB) recycling in the Africa region at a meeting organized by UN Environment in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment of Burkina Faso.

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