

(Colombo, Sri Lanka) Dr. Champika Amarasinghe, speaking out at an ILO supported training workshop on Green Jobs project, says "When we initially had the idea of conducting this workshop, we noticed that people who work in this field are often neglected, but most people don't realize that they do an essentially important job."

Addressing the crowd, Dr. Amarasinghe mentioned that most waste collectors find themselves developing various illnesses particularly respiratory illnesses. Supporting her claim, many agreed with her on eventually decreasing the efficiency causing them to work less and earn a lower income than they otherwise would.

Occupational Safety and Health is an important element to ensure decent work for men and women. However, occupational Safety and health challenges are many in Sri Lanka with an increasing numbers of fatalities attributable to occupational accidents. Inadequate safety gear, unsafe working environment, lack of awareness on safety measures and its impact on one's health have been found to be some of the root causes of this problem. Being aware of this, ILO together with its tripartite partners has stepped in to implement the Green Jobs programs which would create better working conditions, improving productivity and workers health for a just transition. An unhealthy work place impacts adversely on workers, employers and the public alike. NIOSH believes that these programs would yield a positive outcome in order to uplift the safety standards while minimizing the health issues faced by the employees.

The main objective of the recently concluded training workshop conducted by the Waste Management Authority (WMA), National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) was to create awareness on improving the safety, health and efficiency of waste collectors. This project was funded by the ILO-Government of Australia Partnership Agreement. The crowd present at this workshop included waste collectors as well as people who work in this field along with Public Health officials.

The Director-General of NIOSH very eloquently pointed out the importance of taking care of oneself by wearing the safety gear that they are expected to wear while on the job. Although these people agreed that they find it very uncomfortable to wear them while working, she explained that by considering safety before comfort, they would not only protect themselves from various diseases, they would be able to increase their income as well.

Non cooperation of the public and a lack of respect for waste pickers was a constant challenge in the waste sector. For instance, even if requested politely, most people still refuse to use garbage bags and they are reluctant to adhere to the waste collecting time schedules provided by the authorities. As Head of NIOSH, Dr. Amarasinghe is well aware of the issues faced by these workers and have conducted much research on the subject. She encouraged them advising "that it's not practical to expect things to change overnight; but just as you agree that things are now better than they were in the past, you can surely make an effort to change the future."

Many agreed to this and undoubtedly felt that their pleas were heard and considered.

In order to make the material easy to comprehend and 'not forgotten', the participants were given a set of leaflets with safety instructions printed in simple Sinhala. They were also given a chance to discuss among themselves and arrive at suggestions to improve current workplace practice, and voice their opinion on what they think about the workshop.

Mr. Sugath Salgado, a participant from the Horana Urban Council mentioned that the workshop was very informative and that they appreciate the effort taken by the organizers to make a change.

Mrs. Niranja Jayasena, the Zonal Manager of the WMA mentioned that they are very happy with the outcome and expect good results. However, she also motioned that perhaps in the future they could include more people who have the authority to implement the changes as the waste collectors themselves are often neglected by the public. They also have a future plan in mind to conduct a health clinic to assess the health status of these workers in order to gain a better idea about the risks involved in the field.

The Employers Federation of Ceylon nurtures Green Jobs with enthusiasm. Realizing the utmost importance of encouraging environmentally friendly practices among the employers in the country, Ms. Thamali Senanayake of The Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) explained how they are currently working in partnership with the ILO on a Green Jobs Project. She mentioned that their main intention was to conduct a mapping exercise of existing environmentally friendly practices being carried out in various organizations. In the process, through a questionnaire capturing the essence of green jobs, it is sought to improve the employers' understanding of green jobs in order to ensure a just transition for workers and employers towards a more environmentally friendly and socially fair development in the country.

Furthermore Ms. Thamali explained, “We also wanted to bring this fairly new concept of Green Jobs to the attention of the employers and their employees. By doing a very comprehensive survey, we were able to assess what practices are currently being taken. This allows us to analyse the current situation and decide on the necessary training that should be provided for more efficient, sustainable practices.”

This project is being carried out in such a way that both the technical aspects (of the environment) as well as the managerial aspects (of the employers) are carefully looked in to. This would pave the way to accelerate job recover, reduce social gaps, support development goals and realize decent work. Hence while this would provide a more holistic approach to the topic, as Thamali explained, concepts such as ‘decent work’ are not well known or understood among the majority of employers. This project provides the opportunity to create awareness on such topics as well as monitor how often they are put to practice.

The dedicated Green Team of EFC has been trained for this and is currently in the process of analysing the responses received from the employers. A dissemination event is to follow in May 2012 to share good practices and lessons learned.

The Ceylon Workers’ Congress shows optimism regarding the potential of new employment opportunities yielding from Green Jobs. In an interview with the Vice President and Director of International Affairs of the CWC, Mr. D. Mathiyugaraja spoke with enthusiasm of how with the assistance of the ILO and the Ministry of Labour a great deal of work has been carried out in relation to promoting green jobs in Sri Lanka. He mentioned that their main focus has been on solid waste management and the reduction of greenhouse gas emission.

While admitting that this is a concept that’s new to our country, he stressed on the fact that more awareness among the public is necessary in order to protect the environment we live in. Looking at the project from a different point of view, he said,

“The Trade Union is very optimistic about the potential outcomes of this programme. We think that in addition to diverting existing jobs to more eco friendly jobs, there is a good chance of developing new employment opportunities. The newly introduced Green Jobs could be a solution to the decreasing unemployment rate of the country.”

However, he also mentioned that one of the biggest challenges they face is that Sri Lanka being a third world country bears a considerably low unemployment rate and this might restrict their intention of giving priority to promoting green jobs.

“In a country like ours, people look for any sort of jobs that are available so we are cautiously working hard to create awareness and promote green jobs.”

Furthermore Mr. Mathiyugaraja mentioned that the Trade Union is willing to take the challenge to make an impact and change the system. They foresee the advantages and are enthusiastic about seeing a brighter future. Especially in the agricultural sector he mentioned that people are at present more focused on high speed manufacturing at the cost of destroying the environment. He explained how people often ignorantly dump solid waste without caution, how strong chemicals are used without care and how the protection of the health and safety of the workers are too often overlooked.

CWC together with the ILO and CEPA are currently piloting a project curriculum for green jobs. This would be used to train workers and employers in order to ensure that environmentally friendly practices are introduced and actively carried out. The CWC is concerned about contributing to the country’s overall policy on green jobs and thereby work together towards a better, safer, eco friendly future.