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## Greening the Brown

### \*Decent Work for Waste Workers

April 29, 2012, 7:28 pm



"And Man created the plastic bag and the tin and aluminium can and the cellophane wrapper and the paper plate, and this was good because Man could then take his automobile and buy all his food in one place and He could save that which was good to eat in the refrigerator and throw away that which had no further use. And soon the earth was covered with plastic bags and aluminium cans and paper plates and disposable bottles and there was nowhere to sit down or walk, and Man shook his head and cried: 'Look at this God-awful mess.' "- Art Buchwald, 1970

The 3-acre waste management site which nestles in the valley of Bankiyawaththa employs the use of nature's survival of the fittest strategy. Sans the use of harmful chemicals, the workers are provided with a safe and danger-free environment. This is one dump site that is free of flies. The waste is treated so that the maggots do not reach their full life cycle and die before they become flies. Public Health Inspector, Nimal relies on nature as an indicator for the success in this strategy. The storks and finches that surround Bankiyawaththa are omnipresent. If they are seen on the mounds of waste it indicates that the maggots have made their way to

the top, as these birds prey on the maggots. This is a signal for Nimal that he has to increase the level of heat but not beyond (70 degrees centigrade) within the waste pile in order to prevent maggots from surfacing on the waste mound or transforming into flies.

Some good work practices were observed on our field visit. Out of 17 health labourer of whom 13 are women, 8 women and 2 men have been acquired an NVQ qualification through the UC sponsored training programme. Though some of the workers are considered 'casual' workers, permanent cadre benefits such as bonuses, provident fund benefits and loan facilities are extended to them as well.

The consultants Gemunu and Haritha, enlisted by the ILO-Australia Partnership Agreement/ Green Jobs in Asia project, to provide value chain development interventions in the Western Province have toured Balangoda and are now ready to support replication of some of these good practices in the Western Province.

The Balangoda Urban Council which is within the admin district of Rathnapura is responsible for waste management of four Pradheshiya Sabha divisions. The Urban Council is chaired by Mr Nimal Gamini Weerasinghe. Public Health Inspector Nimal is responsible for an innovative project which he initiated to green the waste management sector. He has successfully built a model upon which these dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs integrate decent work elements to make a just transition for workers into green jobs. Nimal's first task was to start with the households as the first step in the cycle of waste management. Households were taught to segregate waste at source, so that the life of the waste picker is made easier. Children in the homes were given special attention so that they carried the message back to school.

Schools were approached to promote waste sorting and children were encouraged to bring household waste to a bartering point in the school. Three methods of waste as a resource for collection were then used to support children to stay in school, to participate better and be more aware of environmental issues. Children who could not afford funds for tutoring, transport, supplies etc... were given money in exchange for well segregated waste, to help them make optimum use of free education. Others were given supplementary items for schoolwork in lieu of the waste collected. A third category of children were awarded points for bringing in well segregated waste. They would accumulate points in slabs of 3000, 5000 and 10,000, and given badges accordingly. These children also comprised the 'green team' that supports general awareness amongst their school community. They also participate in monitoring and encouraging their colleagues to keep the school clean. Whilst these activities are done with the schools and the communities the Urban Council has set up a system to accept this waste. Two methods have been adopted; dependent on household/cottage industry waste, estimation for waste is undertaken. Once segregated waste is handed over to the collection point, the household/ cottage industry earn credits against the estimates. In the event the credits are more than the estimates, the household accrues points which earn them money. The urban council has

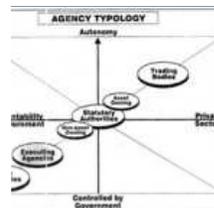
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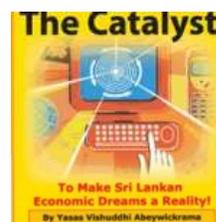
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created two positions per collection point, and provided secure and safe jobs for waste collectors.

Sunil and Saroja work a 9-5 shift, 6 days of the week, and earn a minimum wage per month and are also entitled to a pension. They are now called Manager and Assistant Manager of the collection Centre. The working environment in this cosy and clean building is pleasant and comfortable. This segregation of waste from source to collection point, has provided many workers in the UC with good jobs, will reach 10,000 households by 2012 with good practices for waste segregation and provide about 10,000 children with incentives to stay in school.

In the Western province of Sri Lanka, one finds the little town of Karadhiyana, the only dump site in the zone. The staff here work eight hour shifts and the site is staffed 365 days a year. They have 27 workers, out of which only 8 are men and the other 19 are female. The females, although very hardworking are not able to accumulate as high a daily wage as the males, this is not due to any gender discrimination, but more to do with physical ability. Says

Vasanthi 'the men do not tire as fast as the women whilst picking through the waste and are therefore able to pick more, and earn up to 80,000 rupees per month'. The women however earn approximately 40,000-60,000 rupees only per month.

Although there is a significant difference in wages, it is still one of the highest paying jobs in the informal sector. The uneducated women who work on this site are able to feed, clothe and provide their families with shelter, as do the men. Vasanthi says "There is no other job that offers this kind of freedom. I work from ten to five, and I can go home, cook and attend to household matters and I earn enough for us to be comfortable." Due to the welfare system practiced at the site, Vasanthi is also able to obtain second-hand books and recyclable goods for her children.

Vasanthi knows that the site is constantly being developed, the workers are treated with respect and care, and they have safety equipment, so she does not mind her children following in her footsteps at all. This is rare, since most labourers tend to want 'better' for their children, but Vasanthi sees her job as a better way of life.

As depicted above, the Karadhiyana site ensures the safety and health of their workers. They have all been provided with safety gear such as boots, helmets, gloves and facemasks. There is a shower in place for them to bathe before returning home; this way there are no germs carried back to children and loved ones at home. After having participated in health camps and similar training programmes, there has been a decrease in the number of illnesses and casualties, and no hospitalizations. In addition to this they have also been provided with training on food storage and consumption on the site, which is also a contributing factor to their good health. The equipment used by the workers is changed every 3 months, to ensure quality assured occupational safety.

The Karadhiyana site, much like the system in Balangoda has an interactive community aspect as well. There are select people in the area who bring in segregated waste from their homes; these select individuals pay a certain amount to the Waste Management Authority thus being provided with the facilities to bring in the waste.

Waste collecting techniques have also been improved due to ILO's technical guidance. The collecting trucks now have sheets that cover the waste when being brought in, and there are collection carts used to ensure dogs and cats cannot access the waste. Meat and other such pungent items are buried in holes excavated in the area so that fly-by birds will not discard these items all around the surrounding neighbourhood. All these OSH measures have contributed greatly to the wellbeing and satisfaction of the workers, who tell us they are happy and lucky to have found such a career.

Orison International, a Malaysian institute is also embarking on a project with the Karadhiyana Waste Management Authority in order to generate energy by burning waste and refuse. The Authority plans to introduce good workplace practices here too. Clearly, waste management has fast become a global concern, and ILO's effort to green these jobs to ensure its eco-friendly worker-centred-management is significant.

(Courtesy ILO)

Tuesday, 24th April 2012

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