

Promoting e-Women's Participation in Waste Recycling



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COUNTRY: India

FULL NAME OF THE PROGRAMME: Transforming the consumption patterns in selected Indian cities with a focus on sustainable e-waste management (GIZ – Microsoft DPP)

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PROJECT REACH (STATES / REGION): GIZ Microsoft DPP Project – operated in the two Indian cities – Ahmedabad and Kolkata

DURATION OF PROGRAM: April 2012 – October 2015



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Introduction

Rapid urbanisation has burdened cities with an issue that no one can ignore -- unprecedented amounts of waste. Given the extent of large generation of waste and the complexity of the newly introduced waste streams like electronic waste and lack of capacities and infrastructure in cities, waste management gains a prominence in several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Its prominence in SDGs in both focused and tangential ways, shows how humankind's massive waste is linked to poverty, gender inequality and job creation¹. The SDG 12 captures to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns by making it clear that the value of waste picking is not to be squandered. In many developing countries like India, waste pickers are the key economic actors whose work feeds the recycling market with materials that would otherwise be dumped, especially where waste segregation is not traditionally practised. Most Indian cities run on the operations of the informal sector, which includes the one percent of an average city's population, who reduce pressure on the environment by recycling approximately twenty percent of the generated waste². And yet, these informal recyclers lack formal recognition, equal rights, secure & safe livelihoods and dignity. As consumption patterns change with a growing economy, their work exposes them to even higher levels of pollution and dangerous toxins as a result of handling complex waste streams like electronic waste (e-waste).

The e-waste legislation in India was notified in May 2011 which is based on the principle of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). EPR becomes a matter of concern as producers & manufacturers, government and bulk consumers would have to engage with the formal recycling companies to be legally compliant with the legislation. As per the study³ done by Manufacturer's Association for Information Technology (MAIT) and GIZ, e-waste generation in India was estimated around 4,70,000 metric tonnes in the year 2011 of which 90-95% of the e-waste was handled by the informal sector. The study further revealed that several formal e-waste recycling companies set up in India have been starving for waste for processing, since majority of the e-waste is channelized to and handled by the informal sector.

Initiative

Considering the scale, network and potential of the informal collection channels, it is imperative to rethink the issue of producer responsibility and waste collection,

primarily considering environmentally sound recycling. In this context, the Development Partnership Project (DPP) between GIZ India and the private sector Microsoft India Pvt. Ltd. (earlier NOKIA) was launched in 2012. GIZ India is implementing this DPP project on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The overall objective of the project was to improve the collection and recycling of e-waste from mobile phones and accessories in a more efficient and sustainable way in selected target cities of India, enhancing the consumption behaviour of students and youth and improving the working conditions for informal waste collectors. The initiative had three inter-linked components and work packages viz. **Schools** to enhance the capacities of the teachers and students on sustainable consumption and safe e-waste disposal; **Youth** for reaching out to the young population for integrating sustainability and creative design and **Informal Sector** to focus on mainstreaming and formalization of the informal sector involved in handling e-waste.

SEWA is a central trade union registered in 1972 as an organisation to support the underprivileged, self-employed women workers of the informal economy. These are women who earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. They do not obtain regular salaried employment with welfare benefits like workers in the organised sector. They are the unprotected labour force of our country. Constituting 93% of the labour force, these are workers of the unorganised sector. Of the female labour force in India, more than 94% are in the unorganised sector and are often considered invisible contributors to the economy. ♀♂

Webpage: www.sewa.org



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The project was developed on the experiences of GIZ India under the EU Switch Asia project titled WEEE Recycle, of working with the unorganized workers through partnerships with local NGOs and waste pickers unions like the Solid Waste Collection and Handling (SWaCH) in Pune⁴, India. The learnings from working with agencies like SWaCH led to setting up of collection models which could be formalised and acceptable to government agencies, producers &

¹ WIEGO, 2015

² <http://www.chintan-india.org/>

³ Chaturvedi, Ashish and Arora, Rachna. (2007), E-waste Assessment in India: Specific Focus on Delhi. Manufacturer's Association for Informal Technology (MAIT) and German Technical Cooperation Organization (GTZ) New Delhi, India: BIRD.

⁴ <http://www.swachcoop.com/>

manufacturers and bulk consumers. Another crucial aspect of this model was reaching out to the public or individual consumers and households, as under EPR reaching out to household consumers is one of the biggest challenges for the producers and manufacturers. This led to the selection of an agency named Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) to implement the DPP project in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and work with the informal sector workers. SEWA as a partner was selected due to the following reasons:

1. To develop a collection model which reaches out to households consumers, bulk consumers, commercial establishments, schools and other institutions in the city;
2. To contribute to the political and economic empowerment of women waste pickers and in the process enable self-sufficiency;
3. To develop a recognition of the collection network of the informal sector workers ranging from door to door collection, storage & handling and transfer to authorized recyclers to ensure material recycling and recovery;
4. To develop a demonstration model for SEWA as an e-waste venture, which has huge potential for its upscaling and replication.

Informal to Formal Women Cooperation Model

Women waste pickers in the Ahmedabad region were initially engaged in sorting of municipal waste from dump yard, like similar others do. They often found e-waste as well while sorting the municipal waste dumps for recyclables, and eventually sell these to *kabadiwalas* (scrap dealers). This e-waste, categorized as 'black plastics' in local terminology for any discarded electronics item, used to fetch them little money. In order to get more economic benefits, they started burning the waste to extract copper and other precious metals, so as to get more value for the metals from the market. In this entire process, these waste pickers risk their health unknowingly by releasing heavy metals like lead, cadmium, mercury etc. additionally resulting in environmental pollution.

Under the project, SEWA received trainings from GIZ India and Microsoft on the adverse effects of the uncontrolled burning of e-waste and the benefits of safe handling, collection, dismantling and recycling of e-waste. Under the umbrella of the cooperative, SEWA identified 50 women workers with the willingness to collect e-waste from residential and commercial establishments and to channelize the e-waste to the formal recyclers. These 50 women entrepreneurs are the change agents as they not only approached their fellow women workers towards safe handling of e-waste but also made visits to 500 shops, 100 schools, government offices, residential wards, multiplexes and malls to collect e-waste. SEWA is the first waste pickers union to be authorised as a collection agency by a Producer - Microsoft. In fact this authorisation and pilot



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Yaminiben, Project Coordinator SEWA says, “When door to door solid waste management was shut down due to privatization many women who were associated with SEWA lost their livelihoods. The GIZ-Microsoft initiative has given these women a decent livelihood and fixed income.” ♀♻️

model provides an example for countrywide replication and adoption by other municipalities, producers and bulk consumers. This intervention leads to not only fulfilment of the producer responsibility (EPR) but also enhances the social responsibility of the brand by creating green jobs and mainstreaming existing collection channels.

Promoting Women's Economic and Social Empowerment Within the Initiative

Gender equality is an important goal in itself and a means for achieving development. Development policies and institutions must ensure that all segments of society particularly marginalized informal sector workers, both women and men, be included in the growth process. SEWA focuses its interventions on the marginalised and vulnerable women of the informal economy by enabling them to achieve economic and social empowerment. This brings along the added advantage of gender parity and providing better opportunities for women. GIZ India with Microsoft was involved in the implementation of the development partnership to a large extent with SEWA. Capacity development initiatives through training workshops were developed, designed and implemented where group discussions, role plays and site visits for exchange of experiences were seen as useful tools. These workshops also included management approaches which focused on marketing skills necessary for tackling all categories of consumers for collection and channelization of e-waste. The partnership supported considerable increase in the outreach and impact of the awareness campaigns.

This partnership has empowered SEWA to apply for a formal recognition of the collection model by the state regulatory agency i.e. Gujarat Pollution Control Board under the E-waste Management and Handling Rules, 2011. The other major results are as follows:

- **Increase in earning:** Their monthly income has increased from INR 1500-2000 to INR 2400-2500 which is around 40% increase on an average for the SEWA members;
- **Improvements in living conditions:** Extra earning eventually resulted in betterment of their living by providing better food for their children and being able to hire private tutors for their children's education;
- **Savings in time:** Previously, SEWA women were devoting the entire day for sorting and collection of solid waste from which their earnings were low. Currently, devoting just two hours a week towards the collection of e-waste has helped ensure these women extra income;
- **Recognition of waste pickers:** Initially these rag pickers never got waste from any formal waste sources like schools, commercial establishments etc. but upon attaining authorization they were able to access formal channels of e-waste ;
- **Environmental savings:** The workers have been able to channelize three tons of e-waste to the authorised recycler for processing and recovery of materials leading to a closed loop economy;
- **Awareness creation at local level:** SEWA carries a trust and brand name in Ahmedabad due to their work of solid waste. Their messaging on proper e-waste collection and channelization has been able to connect the schools, youth, colleges and other institutions to adopt sustainable consumption practices to channelize e-waste to the proper recycling channels;
- **Reduction to occupational risks:** Prior to the trainings received under the project, the women would be accompanied by their children to the work place. This practice has stopped, leading to improvements in overall education and health of their children.

Conclusions

Although the project came to a close in October, 2015, the project outcomes and objectives have been met only due to a development partnership model, which looked at working closely with a women-focused organisation for mainstreaming of the model. The integration and adoption of waste collectors in the formal chain has been established and is ongoing, even beyond the project period⁵. The positive consequences of the projects described above are visible:

- National and local government units have initiated partnerships with informal workers for waste collection or recovery;
- Informal women workers have been organised in small

enterprises or cooperatives to manage sorting and recycling centres and thereafter provide the local, regional and international recycling market with valuable materials;

- The women workers integrated in cooperative often earn 40% more than before the support measures;
- The women workers also benefit from improved working conditions and better health protection;
- First of its kind model as being authorised by the manufacturer, leads to wider replication potential not only at the local level but also at the state and national level to support the implementation of EPR.

Madhuben, a traditional waste recycler picking up the waste from the roadside in Manechowk area in Ahmedabad says, *"I used to pick up the waste from Manekchowk area, one of the oldest and busiest commercial areas in the city. I used to get the e-waste also. At that time I did not know what e-waste was. But I still picked it up as it fetched better money. After collection, I would break it up which used to cause skin rashes and breathlessness, incurring expenses on treatment. But still I picked up the e-waste because it fetched money. As a member of SEWA, I became the part of e- waste programme by undertaking the training on its hazards, disposal and recycling practices. I feel very proud as not only my health problem has decreased but I AM ALSO CONTRIBUTING IN SAVING OUR ENVIRONMENT. I also feel to be a **Change Agent** by convincing my other bens (sisters) to be a part of this initiative."* ♀♂♂

These experiences show that the partnership with the informal recycling sector especially with the women workers is a real opportunity to improve waste management and resource efficiency in low and middle income countries while contributing to poverty reduction. If the project wins



the competition, the prize amount will be utilized towards funding replication activities of these women towards proper e-waste collection. The project would like to state that working towards e-waste reduction and sustainable development was further enriched by partnerships which were focused on women's economic empowerment. It was clear that no sustainability without women's active participation would be possible. Also appropriate waste

handling is seen as one of the instruments to come closer to the achieving of the Extended Producer Responsibility models in a developing country like India and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. ♀♂♂

⁵ <http://aischool.net/event-detail.php?id=102>