

Waste pickers: Silent friends of the polluted earth

By Marianne de Nazareth

The sight of a waste picker walking the deserted streets, with a big bag slung on his back as you take your early morning constitutional, is a common sight to most of us in India. Children and women also form a large section of this group of informal entrepreneurs.

Picking through stinking garbage dumps, these waste pickers are workers in the informal economy, who recover recyclable materials from waste thrown out by offices and homes. These dumps are usually found on every road, in every city, in India. They work silently in their poverty ridden world, making ends meet, long before it became fashionable to talk about Climate Change.

Long before all the measures to contain greenhouse gas emissions, the waste pickers were there, as silent friends of the earth and our planet.

Today they are fighting to be recognised as being invisible entrepreneurs on the frontlines

of the fight against climate change, earning livelihoods from recovery and recycling, thereby reducing the demand for natural resources, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate benefits

So what really are the climate benefits by recycling? There are huge climate benefits as recycling, is one of the cheapest and fastest ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Avoiding one tonne of CO2 emissions through recycling, costs 30 per cent less than doing so through energy efficiency, and 90 per cent less than wind power according to research undertaken by a delegation of waste picker associations, who support and organise waste pickers in developing countries.

According to information released by them, recycling provides productive work for an estimated one per cent of the population in developing countries, in processes such as collection, recovery, sorting, grading, cleaning, baling, processing and manufacturing into new products.

Even in developed countries, recycling provides 10 times as many jobs per tonne of waste as do incinerators and landfills.

That is why these organisations are pushing for waste pickers' efforts to expand and formalise their operations. This will result in more resource recovery, productive work, better working conditions and thereby reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

Recycling saves energy and trees and it also saves money. Resource recovery reduces emissions in the forestry, mining and manufacturing sectors by replacing virgin materials used in manufacturing. Much less energy is required to manufacture goods from recycled materials, such as glass, metals and plastic, than from virgin materials.

In the case of paper and wood products, there is another advantage: recycling paper products means less demand for wood and less deforestation.

Incineration and landfill schemes conflict directly with recycling and composting, competing for similar materials: paper, cardboard,

plastics and organics. Yet recycling reduces emissions 25 times more than incineration does. And incinerators emit more CO2 per unit of electricity than do coal-fired power plants. Waste pickers and other recycling workers in the informal economy are highly-efficient environmental entrepreneurs.

Culturally in India the 'kabaddi wallah' was here long before recycling became a modern day buzz word. Materials recovery and recycling is the preferred option for all waste management programmes.

Industrialised countries must reduce consumption of natural resources, limit waste generation, increase in-country recycling, and avoid all export of waste and technologies that contribute to climate change.

Today national governments should recognise the critical and productive role that the informal recycling sector contributes to climate change mitigation, and invest in resource recovery programmes that ensure decent livelihoods for all workers and traders in the recycling economy.