



Organizing Informal Waste Pickers

A Case Study of Bengaluru, India



About this Case Study

Organizing Informal Waste Pickers: A Case Study of Bengaluru, India reviews efforts to organize waste pickers in Bangalore city, Southern India by a network of non-governmental organizations. Using a “top down” approach, the network engaged with the top leadership in the municipality and the alternate dispute resolution system or “Lok Adalat” to direct the municipality to recognize waste pickers. This effort led to the first enumeration and registration initiative by an Indian urban local body and to the forming of a city-wide waste pickers’ and waste itinerant buyers’ membership-based organization called Hasirudala (meaning “green force”). This case study focuses on activities from 2011 to early 2012 and describes the formation, challenges and achievements of Hasirudala, which supports and represents waste pickers in the city. For more on recent activities of Hasirudala, please visit their website www.hasirudala.in.

About the Author

Chaya Chengappa is a development professional specializing in environmental management and sustainable development. She has over 14 years of experience designing, implementing and evaluating programs in South Asia. Chaya was the program manager at CHF International in Bangalore, India, where she was involved in creating scalable solutions for urban poor communities for accessing basic infrastructure, developing systems for viable decentralized waste management systems, and testing market based solutions for improving the lives of informal workers. She has worked with partner organizations and the urban local body to initiate the process of organizing informal waste pickers in Bangalore. Prior to joining CHF International, Chaya worked in Development Alternatives, focusing on environmental monitoring, outreach, and improvement. She is currently based in Ontario, Canada.

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Photos: Hasirudala

Introduction

Bengaluru or Bangalore, the capital city of the southern Indian state of Karnataka, is a fast growing metropolis with a population of more than 6 million. The “garden city” is currently faced with diminishing green space and increasing population and infrastructural woes including improper solid waste management. The Greater Bangalore Municipal Corporation, otherwise known as Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), manages the city’s waste collection and disposal. The BBMP estimates the city generates 3,000 tons of solid waste per day. Despite the fact that the BBMP spends an estimated Rs.200 crore (approximately US\$ 44 million at Rs.45 to a dollar)¹ on solid waste management, a large informal workforce consisting of waste pickers, itinerant buyers and others connected to the recycling sector (small and large scrap dealers, whole sale traders and recycling industries) plays a crucial role in managing the city’s waste. There is little or no recognition of the informal workforce’s contribution to the city’s solid waste management or to the positive impact this workforce has on the environment. Mythri Sarva Seva Samithi (MSSS), a non-governmental organization(NGO) working with waste pickers, estimates that this informal sector retrieves and recycles around 600 tons of recyclable waste every day, which saves the BBMP around Rs.13.5 lakh² (approximately US \$30,000 at Rs. 45 to a dollar) per day. In addition, waste pickers are exploited by scrap dealers on the price and weight of scrap material and face harassment from the police, municipal workers and the public.

A World Bank study estimates that one to two per cent of the global population earns a living through waste picking.³ It is estimated that there are 1.5 million waste pickers and itinerant buyers in India⁴ and 15,000 waste pickers in Bengaluru alone.⁵ In the absence of enumeration,statistics on waste pickers in the city vary. Discussions with waste pickers give an estimate of nearly 20,000waste pickers (based on a minimum of 20 waste pickers in each administrative ward).⁶

Despite more than two decades of working with waste pickers and their children, NGOs in the city have not successfully “organized” or “formalized” them. Rather, NGO engagement with waste pickers was focused on improving their access to education, housing, basic services and to waste through linkages with households and business. The process was limited to certain pockets within the city.

A sample survey of informal waste pickers (conducted by CHF International and MSSS in 2010),⁷ provided interesting insights into Bengaluru’s different categories of waste pickers and their socio-economic conditions. The survey found a significant number of young (18 to 40 years of age), illiterate, and economically and socially disadvantaged people engaged in waste picking in the city. In addition to traditional waste pickers, a significant proportion of the migrant population in the city is working with waste. The majority of the waste pickers surveyed (70 per cent) earned between 100 and 200 rupees per day. Their access to water, sanitation and housing facilities in the city still remains inadequate.

1 BBMP estimate reported in the local media during the announcement of the solid waste management cess (tax) 2011.

2 Current cost for BBMP to landfill 1 ton of waste is Rs.2219 per ton. The data was provided by the BBMP during public consultations on the new solid waste management tender during May-June 2011.

3 Bartone, C. 1988, “The Value in Wastes,” Decade Watch.

4 Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers estimate.

5 Discussions with Anselm Rosario, Executive Director, Mythri Sarva Seva Samithi, Bangalore.

6 There are 198 wards in Bengaluru.

7 264 informal waste pickers across various categories were surveyed across Bengaluru city in Sept-Oct 2010.

This situation is worse among migrant waste pickers, who live in temporary accommodation and lack basic identity cards. Interestingly, the survey also revealed that although waste picking was once a female-dominated profession, the number of men who waste pick as their profession is increasing.⁸ The survey was a good basis for conducting a comprehensive enumeration of waste pickers in the city to accelerate the process to recognize them.

Organizing Waste Pickers

As the result of an initiative by a network of non-governmental organizations representing waste pickers in Bengaluru, waste pickers achieved a landmark in their movement to receive recognition for their contribution to the city in June, 2011. The Commissioner of the BBMP issued an official circular to all 8 BBMP administrative zones of the city to register waste pickers and itinerant buyers and enumerate scrap dealers, which was the first step towards formalizing their roles. With this initiative, the BBMP attained the unique distinction of being the first urban local body in the country to initiate the registration of waste pickers. The BBMP has committed to partially fund the human and material resources to complete the process.

It's important to consider that because of Bengaluru's size, it was impossible for just one organization to organize waste pickers across the city. Rather, **the combined effort of a network of organizations working together proved instrumental both in initiating the registration process and informing a city wide waste pickers' and waste itinerant buyers' membership-based organization called *Hasirudala*** (meaning "green force") in mid-2011. Formed to support and represent the cause of waste pickers in the city, Hasirudala is working towards becoming a registered membership-based organization with its own organizational structure and constitution. Membership to the organization will be facilitated by all partners working with waste pickers through the network.

The network is formed by many organizations working with waste pickers across the city. The Alliance of Indian Waste pickers (AIW)⁹ is the most broadly reaching of these organizations as it supports the advocacy efforts of and works with all the network partners that represent the city's waste pickers. CHF International¹⁰ and MSSS¹¹ also work with city's waste pickers and applicable organizations. CHF International, through its extended program on decentralized waste management in slum communities, worked with both the AIW secretariat and MSSS to mobilize and train grassroots organizations and waste pickers. Here, with assistance from the AIW secretariat, MSSS networked with local NGOs and provided technical input to help them to build capacity, understand the issues of organizing waste pickers and gain knowledge on waste management. Seven organizations have joined this initiative to enumerate, register and train waste pickers in the 8 BBMP zones. These organizations include Gilgal Charitable Trust, Grace, Divya Jyothi Trust, Ragpickers Education & Development Scheme, Waste Wise Trust, Namana Foundation and Radio Active. The organizations

⁸ Out of 264 waste pickers interviewed, 52 percent were men and 48 percent were women. The majority of the migrant waste pickers interviewed were men while majority of the local waste pickers interviewed were women.

⁹ AIW is a national network of over 30 organizations working with and comprised of informal recyclers, waste pickers and/or itinerant buyers with a presence in 22 cities across India. It is a platform for undertaking issue-based advocacy.

¹⁰ CHF is an international development and humanitarian assistance organization working in conflict-affected and developing countries.

¹¹ MSSS is a NGO involved in poverty and environmental issues working with waste pickers and their families since 1987.

were selected based on their commitment and experience working in slum communities on issues of accessing basic amenities like fair price food, grains, water, sanitation and permanent housing. They have developed working relationships with government officials and elected representatives.

The network has consistently participated in an active and influential citizens' group promoting decentralized waste management in the city. This group, called the Solid Waste Management Round Table (SWMRT), has proposed and promoted the integration of waste pickers and small scrap dealers in running Dry Waste Collection Centres called *Kartavya* in every ward¹² of the BBMP. In addition, the SWMRT has engaged with the Lok Adalat¹³ since mid-2010 to direct the BBMP to implement decentralized waste management across the city. The network was able to utilize these efforts to lobby on behalf of waste pickers.

Strategy

Several advocacy efforts proved key both in formalizing the role of and achieving recognition for waste pickers in Bengaluru and in the formation of Hasirudala. Working closely with all network partners, the AIW coordinated critical efforts directed towards the BBMP, the SWMRT, the Lok Adalat and other stakeholders in the city, the state and the public. In contrast to previous "bottom up" efforts, the network as a whole used a "top down approach" as a key method of engaging the BBMP in enumerating and registering waste pickers. In addition, the BBMP Commissioner's decision to enumerate, register and integrate waste pickers formally into the city's solid waste management system resulted directly from a directive issued by the Lok Adalat. Finally, networking through the SWMRT helped open up opportunities for engaging the BBMP and the Lok Adalat.

In May, 2011, the SWMRT, which has credibility with the BBMP, the Karnataka Pollution Control Board, the Lok Adalat and the public, was invited to present the city's waste management issues to the Lok Adalat. The AIW secretariat and

MSSS, as members of SWMRT, presented the issue of waste pickers to the Lok Adalat, immediately after which the AIW secretariat filed an affidavit in an ongoing legal intervention by a local body against the State of Karnataka.¹⁴ The affidavit explained the present situation of waste pickers, the legal provisions for their integration into formal waste management



Women waste pickers during a meeting organized by the network partners.

12 There are 198 wards in Bengaluru under the jurisdiction of the BBMP.

13 People's court usually presided over by retired judges, social activists, or other members of the legal profession.

14 W.P. NO. 13473 of 1998 (PIL) between Bellandur Gram Panchayat (Petitioner) and Government of Karnataka (Respondent) regarding water supply to Bellandur village as referred to the Lok Adalat.

systems, and the social security schemes of the government available for waste pickers. It submitted a road map for the integration of waste pickers in Bengaluru and requested the court to direct the BBMP to follow this map and to enable a viable integration model through the BBMP's financial commitment to the registration process. The Lok Adalat directed the BBMP to implement the road map, and, in response, the Commissioner of the BBMP approved the registration of waste pickers.

Almost all initiatives to organize waste pickers have taken a "bottom up" approach, organizing waste pickers first before lobbying with government. In Bengaluru, the opportunity to organize waste pickers came through the reverse approach – advocacy with the top leadership in the municipality and the use of the Lok Adalat for a quick decision on the process of registration. Challenges on the ground were successfully overcome because organizations mobilized and trained waste pickers intensively across the city and because they regularly interacted with BBMP leadership and field staff at the centre and in the different zones.

Methodology for Registration

With the participation of all the network organizations, the AIW secretariat prepared a registration methodology, which includes a registration form, for enumerating and registering waste pickers and itinerant buyers and for the enumeration of scrap dealers. This methodology, which was based on the registration process proposed by Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat¹⁵ to the task force on the social security scheme¹⁶ for informal workers (including waste pickers), was piloted for the first time in Bengaluru. The methodology enables the BBMP to register and issue authorized photo identity cards. It requires authentication of waste pickers through an introduction letter from residents, NGOs or scrap dealers. The network of organizations trained the applicable BBMP staff on the process of enumeration and registration. The registration form also collects data at a ward level to assess the approximate waste that is diverted from landfills by the informal sector.



Identity Card distribution during the first samavesha (conference) of waste pickers in Bangalore.

¹⁵ A registered trade union of over 8000 self-employed, unprotected and unrecognized waste pickers & itinerant buyers in Pune.

¹⁶ The scheme, under the "Unorganized Sector Workers' Bill" of the Ministry of Labour, Government of India, seeks to enable informal workers access to social security such as pension, insurance etc.

The methodology was accepted by the Commissioner of the BBMP, circulated to all 8 zones, and the pilot was tested in the city's west zone. The gaps identified from the pilot helped improve the efficiency of the registration process. In order to streamline the process, the network requested that the BBMP appoint nodal officers in the central and zone offices to work with representatives from the seven network partners. In order to facilitate the process in the central zone office and in the zones across the city, the BBMP appointed the Technical Advisor and the Chief Engineer of Environmental Cell as the nodal officer while environmental engineers took on the responsibility of coordinating the process in each zone.

Results

As a result of the movement to organize waste pickers in Bengaluru, several results have been observed in the latter half of 2011.

So far, 3,200 waste pickers have been registered, while the target is to reach 5,000 waste pickers and itinerant buyers by March, 2012. Registration gives waste pickers authorization to collect waste and therefore protect themselves against harassment from the police, municipal workers and the public.

This is the first time an urban local body has invested in the process of registering waste pickers in the country. As per the request of the network, the BBMP allocated a budget for printing registration forms, data entry, creating a centralized database, and designing and issuing identity cards to waste pickers. As the result of consistent network advocacy efforts, the BBMP has also agreed in principle to support 18 surveyors from NGOs to assist the BBMP in completing the 5,000 registrations by March 2012. The BBMP invited the AIW secretariat to advise throughout the process. The AIW suggested that six out of the seven network partner NGOs¹⁷ take on the responsibility of data collection, data entry, and coordinating the issuance of identity cards to waste pickers. The BBMP then prepared an "Expression of Interest" to advance the participation of the NGOs to avoid the bureaucratic process of issuing tenders. All six organizations sent in proposals and after due diligence, the proposals were approved.

Photo identity cards with unique numbers have been created for registered waste pickers to aid in tracking. The first 220 identity cards were distributed to waste pickers during the first *Samavesha* (conference) of waste pickers in the city in early August, 2011. Five hundred and fifty waste pickers, itinerant buyers, citizens, officials and media persons from across the city attended the conference. The chief guest was the Honourable Mayor¹⁸ of Bengaluru who recognized waste pickers' contribution to the city and committed to supporting them. The conference received widespread media coverage.

An additional 2700 identity cards were distributed in January 2012.

The BBMP's IT department has created a **central database**. Each zone has access to the database through a user ID and password and is able to upload information. In addition to enabling printing of ID cards centrally, the database represents an effort to institutionalize the registration process so that it will

¹⁷ Radio Active, the community radio station, operated by the Jain Group of Institutions, volunteered to fund the enumeration in one zone.

¹⁸ The BBMP is run by a city council composed of elected representatives from across the city headed by the Mayor.

continue beyond the present intensive drive. Hasirudala will also be provided with access to the data to enable regular updates and follow up.

To make Hasirudala a strong, organized voice, the network partners have **mobilized waste pickers across the city**. The network partners maintain a channel of communication with waste pickers through regular meetings held in the respective zones and at the city level. One or two representatives from each residential area attend the city level meetings,¹⁹ and an informal decision making structure is in place. Hasirudala has already made two important decisions. It has decided to charge an annual membership fee of Rs 50 per waste picker and to charge bulk generators (multi-storied housing complexes, large businesses and institutions) a standard individual salary of Rs 6000 per month with food for the waste pickers managing this bulk waste in the event they do not have access to the segregated recyclable waste.

Network partners have formed and trained **informal collectives of waste pickers** to cope with requests to provide waste management services at the BBMP's Dry Waste Collection Centres and for bulk waste generators. These services include composting organic waste and collecting and segregating recyclable waste. The collection centres and bulk generators are waste pickers' main sources of livelihoods as door to door waste collection in Bengaluru is contracted out.

Continuous dialogue with citizens and officials has resulted in the BBMP approving **Hasirudala to operate three Dry Waste Collection Centres in the city**. Hasirudala continues to seek permission to operate as many centres as possible. In this plan, Hasirudala will have three partners: the BBMP, which will construct the infrastructure (usually done on an ongoing basis as centre creation depends largely on the availability of land); a sponsor organization, which will provide funds for operating each centre for at least three years or until the centre becomes a viable operation; and an operator. Hasirudala is advocating for waste pickers' collectives to operate the centres. The AIW secretariat took the lead in developing a standard operating procedure for the centres and has also lobbied for the inclusion of waste pickers, itinerant buyers and scrap dealers in the operations of the centres.

Network partners have also developed and delivered a two day **training module** for waste pickers to equip them with the essential life and entrepreneurship skills necessary to prepare them for their new role.

Wide spread recognition of the waste pickers' contribution to the environment and city has been received in the local print and electronic media. In November, 2011, during the "Bengaluru Recycling Habba," a festival focused on recycling of waste organized across the city, "Recyclathon" awards were given to waste pickers and to the Gilgal Charitable Trust, a network partner, for its efforts to register waste pickers. The BBMP was also recognized for its proactive role in the inclusion of the city's waste pickers. The awards are the highest recognition given to waste pickers in the city and have created a lot of goodwill for the waste pickers' movement.

The network has lobbied with the BBMP to provide **health insurance** under the government's "Arogyashri²⁰" scheme for tertiary medical care. The network has

19 Representatives from around 35 areas attend the citywide meetings at present.

20 Hospitalization benefit of Rs.1,50,000 for a family of five per year. Additional buffer of Rs.50,000 per year for the entire family on a case to case basis will be provided.

also lobbied for the creation of a **special social security scheme** for waste pickers under the BBMP'S urban poverty alleviation program and for the creation of opportunities for waste pickers to access various government schemes to start new cooperative businesses. These requests have been accepted in principle by the BBMP Commissioner. The AIW is also requesting that the BBMP provide safety gear for all waste pickers in the city.

At the state level, the AIW secretariat has held discussions with the Principal Secretary for the State, Social Welfare to advocate for the **enforcement of the central government scholarship scheme for children of waste pickers**. It has also discussed the promotion of day care facilities for waste pickers' children and for financial assistance to be given to waste pickers and itinerant buyers in order to establish their own businesses.



A male waste picker with an identity card.

The Lok Adalat has given the network an opportunity to make a presentation to all the District Collectors²¹ in Karnataka state about integrating waste pickers into the door to door collection service using the BBMP methodology for registration. The network is keenly following the progress.

²¹ District Collectors are entrusted with the administration of a district.

Challenges

The recognition Hasirudala has received in such a short period of time is a phenomenal achievement that also puts tremendous pressure on the sustainability of its efforts. It is crucial for Hasirudala to leverage the goodwill and efforts of the BBMP. For this, a concerted effort is required by all network partners to make a substantial difference in the lives of at least 1,000 waste pickers in the coming year.

The formation and operation of waste picker collectives is a difficult process and requires consistent support by network partners as, to be successful, the collectives have to function as viable businesses. This is crucial not only because this is waste pickers' main source of income, but also because the success of these cooperatives will promote the integration of waste pickers into the city's waste management system.

Another big challenge for Hasirudala is competition from large companies also seeking to operate the Dry Waste Collection Centres. ITC Limited, a billion dollar publicly-traded company, has entered the recyclable waste collecting industry. It collects recyclable waste from citizens and pays them for this waste, whereas the Hasirudala charges user fees for providing waste management



First samavesha (conference) of waste pickers in Bangalore.

services. In addition, ITC deals only with high quality waste. While the paper waste goes to ITC paper mills, ITC separates the rest of the waste and sells it to scrap traders at enormous profits. In addition, the BBMP and SWMRT have supported ITC's efforts to operate the proposed Dry Waste Collection Centres and continue to promote it. This may affect Hasirudala's aim to operate as many centres as possible across Bengaluru.

There is also opposition to the user fee model promoted by Hasirudala and by a few other organizations in the city. However, the user fee model is a viable option for waste picker collectives and is necessary for sustaining their waste collection services.

The enumeration of scrap shops has not moved forward mainly due to lack of human resources. Though the BBMP has agreed in principle to fund 18 enumerators, the bureaucratic process of approval is time consuming. In the meantime, a new person has taken on the BBMP Commissioner's role, resulting in a delay in the approval process. As a result of these challenges, the network has decided to use all available resources at present to register waste pickers before it enumerates scrap shops.

Future Directions

The network is committed to assisting the BBMP in registering and distributing ID cards to at least 5,000 waste pickers by March, 2012. Another short term goal for the network is to successfully operate the Dry Waste Collection Centres for the BBMP, which will help the continued advocacy efforts in ensuring waste pickers collectives are the preferred operators of such centres. Another goal includes implementing the health insurance scheme and developing a proposal for social security benefits for waste pickers.

In the long term, the network has to strategically advocate for the integration of waste pickers into the waste management system in the rest of the state by working with the Directorate of Municipal Administration²² under the Urban Development Department, Government of Karnataka.

Throughout 2012, the network will continue its efforts to overcome the challenges noted above and will strive to register all waste pickers and itinerant buyers and to enumerate scrap dealers in Bengaluru. In addition, the network will continue its work with the Lok Adalat to support waste pickers in the city and the state. The network will also lobby the Karnataka Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) to mobilize industry partners to support the efforts to place waste picker collectives as Dry Waste Collection Centres operators.

²² Supervises the functioning of all municipalities in Karnataka state except the BBMP.



About Hasirudala

Hasirudala means 'Green Force'. We are a member-based organisation of waste pickers seeking to improve our conditions of work and ensuring our continued access to recyclables in the city of Bangalore. We work towards accessing the benefits of various government programs to which we are entitled, enhancing educational opportunities for our children and advancing the quality of our lives.

Our aim is to integrate waste pickers and other informal sector waste workers into the changing solid waste management landscape in Bangalore. Membership is extended to waste pickers, sorters and itinerant waste buyers; a majority of whom are women. To find out more, please visit www.hasirudala.in

About Inclusive Cities

Inclusive Cities focuses on support and capacity building for membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the urban informal economy. Through organizing, advocacy, and policy analysis, informal workers are making their needs heard within urban planning processes. Partners in the Inclusive Cities project include MBOs of the working poor and technical support organizations committed to improving the situation of the working poor. For more information, and to access research and publications on inclusive urban planning and capacity building tools for MBOs, visit: www.InclusiveCities.org

