

GOOD PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Action Aid – India

Securing rights and sustainable livelihoods through collective action and education for people dependent on the informal economy in India

Good Practice - Government recognition of the invisible workforce of women waste pickers

1) Brief summary:

Nashik is the fourth largest city in the state of Maharashtra. It is located 170 km from Mumbai, the business capital of India. The waste pickers were not recognized as workers anywhere in the country. They recently obtained recognition under the civic authority through the Government of India's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Movement). Around 700 women waste pickers fan out to the six divisions of the city to engage in an awareness campaign and collect garbage from doorsteps for a nominal charge.

2) Key Areas of Good Practice

- Development of Supportive Legal and Policy Frameworks Advocacy Methods **(1.2)**
- Institution and capacity strengthening of implementing agency, project partners including (local) government agencies **(1.9)**
- Awareness raising among informal economy operators/workers and other stakeholders **(4.3)**
- Organising informal economy workers into associations, cooperatives or other officially registered groups **(1.9)**
- Community-based savings and credit schemes **(3.5)**
- Providing support to informal economy operators/workers to access services (social protection services, business registration, access to formal savings and credit schemes, training, etc.) **(3.1)**
- Support to improve Occupational Safety and Health among informal economy workers and Community-based social protection **(2.3 – 4.4)**
- Assisting particularly vulnerable groups on economic empowerment (women, people with disabilities, affected by HIV, youth, refugees, migrants, minority groups, etc.) **(4.6 – 4.7 – 4.8 – 4.9 – 4.11)**

3) Context - Brief description

Where the good practice was implemented:

Nashik is one of the four largest cities of Maharashtra. It is part of the triangle comprising of Mumbai, Pune and Nashik. Nashik is known for its production of grapes and onions and their export across India and abroad.

Nashik is also a popular religious and pilgrimage site in India. There are many famous temples in Nashik, such as Trimbakeshwar and Kalaram. Nashik hosts the Kumbh Mela, one of the most important Hindu festivals, once every 12 years.

Nashik is the destination for many people from Marathwada and other places in Maharashtra, who migrate in search of employment. The number of migrant workers is increasing daily, as it is a fast growing city. From the Marathwada region itself, the high rate of migration has taken place since 1972. 90% of families that migrate from Marathwada are from financially weak backgrounds. They work as wage labour in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and as street hawkers.

Why it was implemented:

In waste picking, 99% of the workers are women. Waste picking has historically been a caste-based occupation, which has faced bias and discrimination. There is no dignity of labour. Waste pickers, especially women, face regular harassment from the police as they are seen as criminals. Though they work for the government and the public by picking and segregating waste, they have never been recognized as workers who contribute significantly to a city's economy. Since they are unorganised and unrecognised, they face many problems such as work related health hazards, illiteracy, poverty, addiction, social stigma and exploitation.

As such, it is important to provide government identity cards, as they serve as credible indicators of the formal recognition of waste pickers. They allow waste pickers social status and dignity of work and enable them to be connected with other government schemes.

Who was involved:

The project staff of Nashik field office has been closely engaged with the Health Officer and the Municipal Commissioner of Nashik Municipal Corporation. The Health Officer closely worked with the project staff under Swach Bharat Abhiyan.

The issuing of ID Cards by the Municipal Corporation under the Swach Bharat Abhiyan benefited 802 women waste pickers. These women are predominantly from the Dalit/SC community and have been working as waste pickers across generations in their families.

When the activity was implemented:

Efforts began in 2008 with the mobilization of waste pickers. In 2015, efforts towards active focus and direction for advocacy increased. As such, the advocacy effort has taken more than five years.

4) Level and type of innovation of the good practice

This practice was innovative as the social mindset of the government, the common public and the waste pickers was challenged in the process of demanding for workers' recognition.

5) Description: processes and steps involved

Since 2009, efforts have been made to mobilize and organize the waste pickers into collectives. Community mobilization helped to understand the living conditions and the problems of the waste pickers, during which it was discovered that they lived very unstable lives and did not have entitlement to documents. Furthermore, they were often harassed and falsely accused of crimes by the police and the municipal corporation.

The corporation workers would often take away their waste, claiming they were stealing. In earlier years, there were 1500 waste pickers, over time however, their numbers have fallen due to regular daily visits of ghantagadi (garbage truck) of Nashik Municipal Corporation.

The initial waste pickers' ID cards came from our own field organisation. However, the police discredited them claiming that NGOs are private and thus the ID cards are not credible. Kumbh Mela, a religious festival, was being organised in Nashik in 2016. This was an apt opportunity to ensure government employment for waste pickers, as there is extensive clean-up work both before and after the event. We networked with the Nashik Municipal Corporation and their contractors and succeeded in getting 465 women waste pickers employed under the government. This was the first successful attempt at getting waste pickers government ID cards. While this was temporary, we discovered that there is indeed a way of providing them ID cards by the Corporation on permanent basis. Women who worked at the Kumbh Mela received wages as per the Minimum Wages Act as well as Provident Fund from the government. This was the first time that women saw wages in large

amounts.

Since the Kumbh Mela, we strengthened our advocacy plans for permanent government ID cards for waste pickers and their secure employment under municipal solid waste management.

We also made efforts to sensitize the government on the living and the working conditions of waste pickers. Later in the year, an accident happened at a dumping yard in Nashik where two waste picker women lost their lives. Henceforth, the Nashik Municipal Corporation prohibited any external entry into the dumping yard. This affected the waste pickers' livelihood, as they do not know any other work. We convinced the Corporation to let them work in the dumping yard again and tried to sensitize them about the conditions of the waste pickers. It was reiterated that the waste pickers are doing the work of the Corporation without being its official employees.

Meanwhile, we were making efforts to get women waste pickers work of door-to-door waste collection. However, residents were not cooperative due to their lack of ID cards and were afraid that the waste pickers will steal. We had several networking and advocacy meeting with the Municipal Corporation for over two years. We asked them to include waste pickers in solid waste management as per the rules of Swach Bharat Abhiyan and Solid Waste Management, but the Corporation would not cooperate and kept doubting the character of waste pickers.

We then started a Whatsapp group called "women for women's help" which circulated a post for door-to-door waste collection. Tremendous work was received in 2016 and 2017. A survey of waste pickers was conducted and the survey data was submitted to the Nashik Municipal Corporation.

The Commissioner agreed to issue ID cards on the condition of police verification of each worker. We attempted the police verification online but there were technical glitches with the system, and as such, this process took some time. We appealed to the Health Officer of the Corporation for alternatives and he directed us to collect Aadhar and Voters' ID cards of all waste pickers.

Meanwhile a training on housekeeping for waste pickers was conducted. We circulated an advertisement for domestic workers for Diwali cleaning in October 2017. During Diwali festival, Hindu families clean their houses with the belief of inviting Goddess Lakshmi (Wealth). Henceforth, there was a heavy demand for domestic workers. Waste pickers were presented with the opportunity to work for a fixed number of hours and days at residential households for cleaning purpose. This way, residents were sensitized about waste pickers and were able to trust them. Employer sensitization was initiated in order to build a working relationship between worker and employer. This gave us the direction to move us towards door to door waste collection under Swach Bharat Abhiyan.

Through individual donor support and our own resources, we also had aprons made for waste pickers in order to ensure them with uniforms with logo of Swach Bharat Abhiyan. This was a strategy to strengthen their official identity as waste pickers along with their ID cards. Around 802 women received ID cards and more than 50 women received aprons. At present, processes are occurring to link them with Solid Waste Management of the Municipal Corporation.

6) Resources and skills needed to carry out the good practice

Networking and advocacy skills with the government, a good relationship with government officials, information of government programmes such as Swach Bharat Abhiyan Rules, social media skills, communication skill, support of community mobilizers, workers collectives, media contacts.

7) Sustainability of the Good Practice

We are now writing applications to the Corporation and meeting them regularly to link waste pickers to Solid Waste Management under Swach Bharat Abhiyan. We are closely collaborating with

the Corporation to fulfil the objectives of the Abhiyan.

Waste pickers have already been mobilized into small collectives. In moving forward, the plan is to register them together as a cooperative and connect this cooperative to the Solid Waste Management Programme. Once women waste pickers get door-to-door waste collection work, their wages and terms of employment will be negotiated with the Corporation through their own cooperative.

8) Replication of Good Practice

It is imperative to first mobilize workers, as their collective strength can help in networking with the government for their rights. Employer sensitization is the next key step. Knowledge of government programmes is necessary to be in an informed position to network with the Municipal Corporation. Additionally, the workers collective should have the third-party support of a local NGO. One should be clear about the purpose of demanding ID cards and the validity period-whether they should have a validity period for regular renewal or be made permanent.

9) Links to Other Resources

Expert contact details, workbooks, video clips, articles, transcripts of review meetings, etc.

10) What would the originators of the Good Practice do differently if they were to do it again?

Lessons Learned

1) Challenge that was faced

Lack of cooperation from the Municipal Corporation and the condition of police verification were major hurdles. In addition, the absence of birth certificates of the waste pickers was another condition that rendered the situation particularly difficult.

2) How it was addressed

Continuous networking meetings and the rules of Swach Bharat Abhiyan helped to join hands with the Corporation. We took responsibility of making ID cards for waste pickers. The Corporation agreed to issue ID cards on the basis of Aadhar cards and Voters ID cards. Data of waste pickers was provided to them.

3) Positive lessons learned that were not covered in the good practice(s)

Government rules of Swach Bharat Abhiyan finally worked in our favour as it clearly states that ID cards have to be issued to waste pickers in every city.