Wastepickers and Climate Change

Global Alliance of Wastepickers and allies www.globalrec.org

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Wastepickers Alliance and allies at COP15, Copenhagen. Dec.2010

Wastepickers are workers in the informal economy who recover recyclable materials from waste. They are invisible entrepreneurs on the frontlines of the fight against climate change, earning livelihoods from recovery and recycling, reducing demand for natural resources, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Yet their successes are being undermined by "waste-to-energy" technologies.

Climate benefits

Recycling is one of the cheapest and fastest ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Avoiding one ton of CO_2 emissions through recycling costs 30% less than doing so through energy efficiency, and 90% less than wind power[1].

Recycling and livelihoods

Recycling provides productive work for an estimated 1% of the population in developing countries, in processes such as collection, recovery, sorting, grading, cleaning, baling, processing and manufacturing into new products[2].Even in developed countries, recycling provides 10 times as many jobs per ton of waste as do incinerators and landfills[3].

Wastepickers on the frontline

Wastepickers' efforts to expand and formalize operations should be supported. This will result in more resource recovery, productive work, better working conditions, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

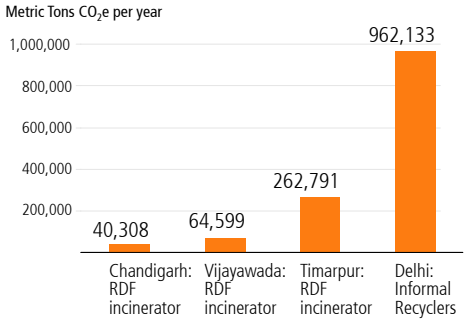
Recycling saves energy and trees

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.

"Waste-to-energy" vs. recycling

Incineration and landfill gas 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[4]. And incinerators emit more CO_2 per unit of electricity than do coal-fired power plants[5].

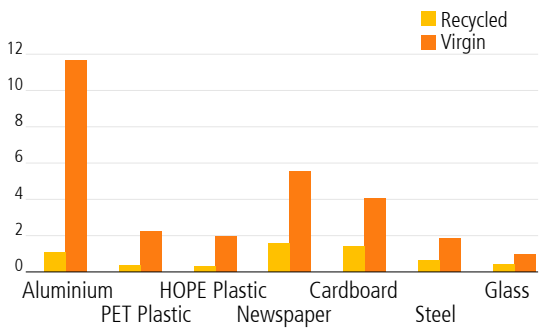
GHG Emissions Reductions: Waste Pickers vs. "Waste-to-Energy"



Source: Chintan, "Cooling Agents: An Examination Of The Role Of The Informal Recycling Sector In Mitigating Climate Change"2009. (RDF=Refuse Derived Fuel).

Wastepickers at Kolkatta dumpsite. Feb. 2006. Lucía Fernández

CO_2 Emisions: Recycled & Virgin Content products (tons eCO2/ton)



1. Lisa Skumatz, "Recycling and climate change," Resource Recycling, October 2008, pp. 14-20.
2. Carl Bartone, "The Value in Wastes," Decade Watch, September 1988.
3. Institute for Local Self-Reliance, Washington, DC, 1997. www.ilsr.org/recycling
4. "Assessment of Materials Management Options for the Massachusetts Solid Waste Master Plan Review," Tellus Institute December 2008, p.2.
5. USEPA's Emissions & Generation Resource Integrated Database, 2000

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False solutions undermine wastepickers
The Clean Development Mechanism and some governments support incinerators and similar technologies in the mistaken belief that they will reduce emissions. Instead, climate subsidies should be redirected to the informal recycling sector to expand recycling.

«Materials recovery and recycling is the preferred option for all waste management programs»

We, waste pickers and other recycling workers in the informal economy are highly-efficient environmental entrepreneurs. We are owed a climate debt for our historical and current contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and solid waste management costs.

Wastepickers working collectively in Philippines. 2010. Gigi Cruz

Materials recovery and recycling is the preferred option for all waste management programs. We do not consider landfill gas-to-energy projects for operating sites , incineration projects, and refuse derived fuel to be recycling or recovery operations.

Industrialized 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.

SWaCH cooperative of Wastepickers in Pune. 2010.

The UNFCCC must establish mitigation mechanisms that are directly accessible to waste workers in the informal sector, and result in significant financial and technical support. Adaptation mechanisms should take into account the human costs of waste disposal, compensate communities for negative impacts, and consult with existing recyclers and wastepickers prior to the approval of any waste-to-energy proposal.

«Industrialized countries must reduce consumption of natural resources»

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

Local governments should support projects and technologies that divert organic waste from landfills into composting and biomethanation, which will eliminate waste-based methane emissions and should be the preferred option. Projects and technologies that divert waste from recycling into incineration and landfilling should not be supported.

Accra dumpsite, Wastepickers Union member Lucía Fernández

Our demands

- Support recycling, not "waste-to-energy"
- End CDM (Clean Development Mechanism) carbon credits for incinerators and operating landfills
- Approve a Green Climate Fund with direct access for recyclers and civil society