



SWaCH members provide door-to-door waste collection. Photo: L. Vryenhoek

SWaCH

Pune, India

SWaCH Seva Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit (known simply as SWaCH, which means “clean”) is a solid waste collection and handling cooperative. Initiated as a pilot project in 2005, it is the first cooperative wholly owned by self-employed waste pickers and waste collectors.

Through a contractual agreement with the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) signed in 2008, more than 2,100 SWaCH members provide door-to-door waste collection to over 360,000 homes in the city. The workers collect in pairs, are paid through user fees, and are accountable to the residents they serve, as well as to the municipality.

The workers segregate collected waste into recyclables—e.g. paper, plastics, metals, and glass—and wet waste for composting. SWaCH has developed a significant composting operation, which sees wet waste turned into valuable natural fertilizer used on public grounds such as a university campus and a research facility.

These efforts mean much less material makes its way to the municipality’s landfill. While the PMC covers administrative costs for SWaCH, purchases equipment (carts, gloves, etc.) and supports health insurance, its costs are far lower than if it paid for private, commercialized collection and disposal. The success of this integrated, decentralized solid waste management system in one municipal ward has led to its expansion into 15 more wards.

A recent MoU with the municipal corporation of sister city Pimpri Chinchwad had dramatically increased the number of homes served by SWaCH. However, friction developed when the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) established a contract that gave a private waste enterprise responsibility for wards not served by SWaCH. This separate contract did not involve user fees, giving the private company an unfair advantage over SWaCH. It also was not in keeping with the ideals of community participation and environmental responsibility. As part of its ongoing struggle to ensure informal waste collectors receive equitable treatment, SWaCH has pulled out of its MOU in Pimpri Chinchwad.

The Struggle for Recognition

SWaCH was born out of the successful struggles of Kagad, Kach, Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union of waste pickers and waste collectors in Pune. KKPKP, registered in 1993, has over 8,000 members, the majority of them women. KKPKP uses twin strategies: non-violent protest and resistance coupled with the development of inclusive solid waste management schemes, such as the SWaCH model in Pune, that improves the lives and working conditions for its membership. It has been highly successful in campaigning for waste collectors to be recognized as "workers," and waste picking as legitimate "work." The union has also worked to ensure its membership has access to medical insurance and children's educational funding, and has established a cooperative credit and savings scheme. KKPKP has taken a strong stand on social issues such as violence against women, child labour, school enrolment, child marriage and domestic violence.

KKPKP strives to end the social stigma and exploitation faced by waste pickers. The photo identity cards it issues to members are now recognized by government. These cards authorize individuals to collect waste material. As well, KKPKP has established cooperative scrap stores to service members and ensure better returns for them on the sale of scrap.



SWaCH composting operations convert wet waste into valuable fertilizer. Photo: L. Vryenhoek

Relevant Publications

Integrating Waste Pickers into Municipal Solid Waste Management in Pune, India by Poornima Chikarmane. 2012. WIEGO Policy Brief (Urban Policies) No. 8.

Refusing to be Cast Aside: Waste Pickers Organizing Around the World by Melanie Samson (editor). 2009. WIEGO

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Cooperatives for Informal Workers' Rights and Sustainable Livelihoods!

Cooperatives create jobs and help improve livelihoods. But cooperatives are more than economic entities; they are an essential part of an alternative economy in which strength lies in social solidarity. Cooperatives allow workers to raise their voices together in the fight for recognition, political power and social protection. Just as pooled resources can achieve better economic outcomes and offer more stable livelihoods for informal workers, united voices can create political change and improve social standing.

WIEGO supports informal workers' cooperatives in their struggle for a better life.