



photo: A. Thavaraj

Provide a Better Service, the Rest Will Follow: SWaCH PCMC Brings Waste Pickers into Mainstream

Background

In 2008, after many decades of working independently, more than 1,000 waste pickers in Pune established a co-operative business of their own. They adopted the name SWaCH because it stood for “Solid Waste Collection and Handling,” which is what waste pickers do, and also because *swach* in Marathi, means “clean,” which is the result of their work. All profits from their business activities – door to door collection of waste, composting and bio-gas production – are shared by SWaCH’s members. Their clients are the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and the citizens of Pune. SWaCH collects the daily household waste generated by 280,000 families in Pune. As a result of its collaboration with the waste pickers of Pune, the PMC saves approximately Rs. 120,000,000 every year.

Pimpri Chinchwad is a fast-growing township on the north-eastern borders of Pune. A region with scattered clusters of houses separated by factories is now home to 1.5 million people. Impressed by the work done by SWaCH in Pune (and after many months of negotiations), the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) awarded SWaCH a five-year contract for managing the solid waste collection system in two of its four prabhags (municipal boroughs) in October 2010. The project was to begin immediately. SWaCH had never managed a mechanized waste-collection system. Its members had never operated heavy machinery, and there wasn’t enough time to train everyone. Nevertheless, SWaCH decided to begin full-scale operations on schedule – any problems that emerged would be solved on the field.

Six months later, SWaCH had reached out to 200,000 families – around 90 per cent of all households in the two prabhags. One hundred and sixteen tipper trucks operated by three-member teams collected 200 tonnes of household waste every day.

Challenges

There are many models for running mechanized collection services. All involve considerable investments in machinery, personnel and training. They also require a great degree of cooperation among the different stakeholders in implementing the model. For instance, SWaCH only handles primary collection and sorting— all biodegradable waste is then loaded on to PCMC compactors for transfer

to a landfill. This necessitates coordination between PCMC and SWaCH personnel on timing, locations and volume of waste transfers. The systems break down if, say, a garbage compactor does not show up on time to offload a collection truck. Since SWaCH is the visible face of the entire waste-collection system in PCMC, it gets blamed for any deficiencies in service.

For instance, Farooque, a SWaCH PCMC coordinator says, “Yesterday the local municipal councillor complained about unclean pick-up locations. Now, I know the teams have hectic schedules and are continually racing against the clock. I can often tell, just by looking at the pick-up location whether the team was in a hurry or whether they were just being tardy. I know that complaints can be annoying at times, but I accept it as feedback. Strangely, I like complaints because it means that I still have a chance to rectify the problem!”

Reaching out to residents of Pimpri Chinchwad is a major challenge for SWaCH. Many of the residents are migrants to the city and work at the new call-centres, BPOs and software companies that have been set up in the last five years. Most residents are not invested, financially or emotionally, in the inclusive growth of their new neighbourhoods. Most importantly, the combined mandatory requirements of source segregation of waste and user-fees are not all that agreeable – especially the part about paying money.

For example, one newspaper columnist wrote, “SWaCH spends money allocated for waste pickers on foreign tours.” The columnist was quoting a municipal councillor who was, in turn, quoting (out of context) a newspaper article on KKP’s participation at the UNFCCC in Tianjin. Though a retraction was made later, the damage was done.

In another case, one resident asked, “I pay taxes. I just paid an exorbitant amount towards property tax. And doesn’t the PCMC give the waste pickers some money? Where is all this money being spent?”

Many PCMC councillors, however, support SWaCH. To help engage more goodwill, PCMC and SWaCH personnel distributed pamphlets and flyers on the benefits of segregation to promote the new waste-collection services.

SWaCH’s best public relations activity, though, turned out to be its members – the women who went door-to-door collecting waste. Six months after the waste-collection

service was launched, many waste pickers reported that residents on their routes were very happy with the service:

“I am offered tea every day by many residents on my route.”

“One person gave my team four new saris.”

“We often get old clothes from residents. They are used but still wearable. Nobody expects waste pickers to wear torn rags these days.”

“On every route, some residents offer us food.”

“They support us. They are happy... especially because the new mechanised service is modern.”

“At first they are surprised to see a woman driving a tipper truck. Nowadays it is normal. Well, not entirely normal—people still look at me curiously but they accept the fact.”

In Pune, KKP (the waste pickers’ union) has fought long and hard to bring about a gradual change in peoples’ attitude towards waste pickers. The struggle for rights took the form of public protests, campaigns and advocacy at the local and national level. Consequently, the Pune Municipal Corporation became the first government body in India to recognize the contribution of waste pickers to the economy and the environment, acknowledge their identity as “workers,” and endorse the waste pickers’ right to recycle value from discarded garbage.

That the waste pickers at PCMC have successfully re-invested the gains achieved by their colleagues in Pune is evident from the feedback gathered in Pimpri Chinchwad. The tags “filthy,” “thieving,” and “good for nothing” – the gentry’s typical opinions about waste pickers – were absent in the feedback from the residents in Pimpri Chinchwad. Instead, residents complained about punctuality, helpline availability, soft-skills, and pricing. In other words, they were complaining about deficiencies in the business, not the people who ran it. And in areas where the service was excellent, the praise was equally high. The residents of Pimpri Chinchwad had not really cared for “waste pickers” or “waste picking.” Punctuality, efficiency, a smart uniform and a smile was all it took to trigger the attitudinal transformation – from waste picker to service-provider.

The change in attitude is also due, in part, to the modernization of the waste-collection model. Thus, while a citizen might grumble about “paying waste pickers,” perhaps she evaluates the new model thus: “Someone has to pay the women who run these trucks and provide me a necessary service.” Once the neighbourhood appreciates the benefits to be had, SWaCH starts talking about “source segregation” – a topic more receptive to friendly ears.

When public support is obvious, political support is inevitable. “Municipal councillors want votes. If they see that people in their constituencies support SWaCH then they will support us at the Council. They want to be involved in something popular too,” says a SWaCH coordinator.

The immediate consequence in areas where SWaCH has got positive feedback is a supportive councillor, which has in turn resulted in cooperation from field-level municipal functionaries.

Looking forward

Given the capital costs, quality of service and measurable deliverables to a municipal corporation (improved public sanitation, reduced operating costs, increased savings, recycling and so on) a mere six months’ worth of data from the SWaCH PCMC model forces one to pose a question: should this not become the base model for any new solid waste-collection system in the world?

Consider the following:

- Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation has already saved nearly Rs. 20,000,000 as a result of sorting and segregation done by SWaCH. Over the contract period of five years, PCMC will save Rs. 4,000,000,000.
- SWaCH segregates and sends 42 per cent of the wet-waste it collects for composting. This figure will rise with available composting infrastructure. Compost sells at Rs. 4,000 per tonne.
- SWaCH estimates that the business model will become sustainable by the end of the contract period – the municipal corporation will not have to spend a single penny for primary waste collection. In all other municipalities, collection charges increase annually!

Recently, in July 2011, PCMC announced a tender for the contract of waste-collection in the two un-served prabhags. Private companies too will bid for this contract. Some of these companies are cash-rich and have the “support” of some municipal councillors. If SWaCH wins the contract, it will run the primary waste-collection of an entire township!

Even if SWaCH fails to win the contract, the competition between an MBO and a corporation will show the citizens of Pimpri Chinchwad that a private company is not necessarily better. It will allow a direct comparison of criteria such as environmental sustainability and workers’ health and earnings. The competition will catalyze the transition of a rights-based movement to a sustainable 21st century business and become the model for replication around the world. Negotiating this transition will be, perhaps, SWaCH’s greatest challenge.

Key concepts

- When MBOs are perceived as companies, they are treated like companies.
- Providing a better, cost-effective service wins support from both consumers and politicians.
- The personnel who run a service are evaluated based upon the quality of service, not by who they are.

Inclusive Cities project: 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