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Green entrepreneurs launch 'social waste management'

Mar 21 2013, 14:36 | By SME Mentor

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Urban populations have become so immune to the astounding mess we are creating that most of us have ceased to notice or care. Thankfully, someone did. Three young entrepreneurs, Debartha Banerjee, Jayanth N, Ritvik Rao, from Mumbai's Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), have devised an end-to-end solution to urban waste management that benefits all stakeholders involved in the process.

A TISS incubator project funded by Unltd India, they launched Sampurn(e)arth in September 2012 with a view to making solid waste management efficient, decentralised and even profitable for housing societies, corporate houses, townships, school and college campuses, etc.

Chain Reaction

Sampurn(e)arth works on the principle that transporting waste to the city's dumping grounds is inefficient and expensive and also hazardous for waste-pickers at these sites. Thus, the start-up encourages on-site segregation, wherever possible. It also sets up on-site biogas or composting facilities for wet waste that crosses a certain threshold, while non-biodegradable waste is transported directly to recycling units. This leaves only a small amount of

dry waste that is transported to dumping grounds.

When Sampurn(e)arth works with a client, it first conducts a waste audit to figure out the quantity of waste being generated. It analyses the categories of waste (wet/dry), its sources, pattern of generation, extent of segregation practiced, existing internal collection system, storage and disposal system, availability of space and feasibility for a probable solution.

A report is then prepared with recommendations for internal collection and storage patterns and also waste disposal. For clients who wish to act post-audit, the firm constructs and operates customised recycling/treatment plants, either on-site or off-site.

Sampurn(e)arth partners with institutes like Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Mumbai for technological support and, for operations, it works with NGOs like Stree Mukti Sanghatana, a women's empowerment group associated with 3,000 women waste-pickers.

Dump Dumping Grounds

While doing their post-graduation in TISS's Social Entrepreneurship programme, Sampurn(e)arth's co-founders realised that 90 per cent of solid waste generated in Mumbai was being disposed at dumping grounds. Since this was an inefficient approach, considering the humungous quantities generated by this metro, they devised an alternative strategy.

Engineers by education, they turned to technology for a decentralised, end-to-end waste-management solution for their clients. "We pooled our initial funding from various business plan competitions which we had won. Next, we become investees at Unltd India, a launchpad for social entrepreneurs. They funded us partly," reveals Jayanth. Later, their fledgling project received funding through the programme organised by

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DBS Bank and TISS. The programme was called DBS-TISS Social Entrepreneurship Programme.

Revenue Model

Sampurn(e)arth has multiple revenue streams, from waste audit to operations and maintenance of compost and biogas plants. For the audit, the fee depends on the scope and complexity of research required while, for waste-management solutions, the company charges a percentage based on the quality and quantity of the waste being processed and the kind of plant being operated.

The start-up has devised an ingenious strategy whereby it only charges a certain percentage of the value of dry waste and, for the remaining value, it gives back recycled paper products to its clients. "For example, if we collect 200 kg of waste worth Rs 1,000, we charge about 40 per cent or Rs.400 and return Rs 600 worth of recycled paper products like notepads and envelopes with branding as required by the client," explains Jayanth.

Large Generators of Waste

As part of their pilot project, the trio installed a 500-kg biogas plant on the TISS campus in December 2011. Within a year, the plant processed over 55,000 kg of food waste from the campus canteen and generated biogas equivalent to 1,000 kg of LPG, which was used in the dining hall for cooking.

Axis Bank is another major client for whom they have channelised over 8,500 kg of dry waste for recycling. Sampurn(e)arth is also in process of becoming a collection and channel partner for TetraPak Company, which keen on getting their cartons recycled after use.

The start-up is talking to NGOs, civil administration bodies and corporate firms and hopes to scale up to processing 500 tonnes a day in the next five years.

As A Social Initiative

Sampurn(e)arth's waste-management solutions provide alternative employment opportunities to waste-pickers, who also get a chance to move out of unhygienic dumping grounds to better working conditions on campuses, in townships and corporate offices.

In an atmosphere where people are becoming increasingly aware of the impact of urbanisation on the environment, Sampurn(e)arth offers corporate clients a way to assume social and environmental responsibility in a profitable and flexible manner. "This approach to waste-management helps us reduce our carbon footprint and save on buying stationery like notepads and notebooks," says Vibha Krishna, Head, Events, Axis Bank.

Will It Catch On?

Waste-management is a neglected area in India, where ignorance, lack of awareness and lack of sensitivity to the environment pose huge challenges. "Waste segregation at source is negligible and most people don't care for the environmental impact of their actions," rues Banerjee. But things are changing, albeit slowly, and our green entrepreneurs are optimistic that their approach to rescuing Mother Earth catches on.

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