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International Day for the Eradication of Poverty Bangladeshi idea triggers global momentum to reduce poverty

DHAKA: A humble idea developed in Bangladesh by the founders of a highly successful local NGO called 'Waste Concern', has launched a global momentum that could enable poor communities around the world improve their incomes and environment. Already in Bangladesh the founders, Abu Hasnat Md. Maqsood Sinha and Iftekhar Enayetullah have motivated and trained hundreds of former waste pickers in five Dhaka communities to turn trash into cash using simple technology and a little marketing know-how.

Every day Dhaka's nearly 11 million people produce around 3,500 tonnes of solid waste (that's around 700 truck loads) -- 80 percent of which is organic and suitable for composting. The City Council, cash strapped and lacking in manpower, only manages to collect about half of the garbage. The other half is left to rot in the heat and humidity of Dhaka -- one of the world's most densely populated cities. Apart from the stench, the discarded trash poses a health hazard, attracting rodents and transmitting diseases. It also clogs drains and run off gutters causing flooding during the monsoon season.

Seven years ago Maqsood Sinha, an urban planner and architect, and Iftekhar Enayetullaah, an urban planner and civil engineer, founded 'Waste Concern'. They were determined to prove that organic waste was actually a resource that could easily and cheaply be transformed into natural compost. "In the beginning it was very difficult to get people interested in working with waste or even giving us space to set up a processing site," Mr. Sinha recalls.

Eventually, the Lions Club gave them a plot of land in a poor suburb of Dhaka, where many people scraped together a living by picking through garbage to collect saleable materials like glass and plastic. In 1995, 'Waste Concern' caught the attention of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which decided to support this budding organization to help build the first organic waste-processing centre in Dhaka.

By 1998, with the support of UNDP and the Government of Bangladesh, 'Waste Concern' had replicated similar systems in four other poor communities around Dhaka. Using small bicycle powered collection carts the former waste pickers who are now working full-time with 'Waste Concern' collect organic garbage (like kitchen scraps) from local householders. Then, using simple technology at their community processing centre they transform the waste into compost over a period of 55 days. Today, the people are not only covering their costs they are making a profit. About 30 percent of their income is from the house to house collection service, while the other 70 percent is through compost sales to fertilizer giant, Alpha Agro.



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Before Waste Concern developed this product there was no organic alternative to chemical fertilizers on the local market. Today the compost created is being used to invigorate soils in many parts of rural Bangladesh that had been depleted of organic nutrients due to excessive use of chemical fertilizers during the Green Revolution of the 1970s. According to Mr. Shahidul Islam, the Director-General of the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute, (BARI) these chemicals have slowly broken down the natural ecology of the soil, resulting in a drastic drop in farmers' harvests. The farmers in an attempt to meet previous production levels, scatter an estimated three million tonnes of chemical fertilizers every year to replenish the soils.

BARI has tested the impact of the organic compost on potato crops. Using organic compost could mean a yield increase of up to 50 percent, while using 30 percent less chemical fertilizers. "You will not solve all the problems of our soil with organic compost alone, but it could be a big part of the solution," Mr. Islam said.

To mark the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty the UNDP recognizes a representative from each region in the world for their outstanding contribution towards improving the economic and social life of their community. This year Maqsood Sinha and Iftekhar Enayetullah will become the first Bangladeshis to receive the 'Race Against Poverty' award. Later this month in New York the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan is scheduled to present the award to the pair for their tireless efforts to improve the livelihoods of hundreds and the environment of a nation.

The idea developed by 'Waste Concern' is now catching on around the world. People from the Philippines, Indonesia, South America and Africa have visited Bangladesh to learn how they can replicate this successful idea in their own communities.

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Background notes for editors:

The 'Race Against Poverty' award is presented annually to people who have made an outstanding contribution towards improving the economic and social life of their community. This year it will be presented by the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan to the recipients during a special ceremony in New York on 30 October.

The recipients of the 2002 awards are Edi Rama, Mayor of the Municipality of Tirana, Albania; Maqsood Sinha and Iftekhar Enayetullah, co-founders of Waste Concern, Bangladesh; Gráce Dotou, founder and President of Qui di t Mieux in Benin; Pablo Sándor, Executive Director and co-founder of Ayacura Foundation in Chile; and Aref Kodeih, founder of the Kobeyat Council for Environment in Lebanon.

The award was first presented in 1997. This the first year Bangladesh nationals have won the award.