



## **WASTE-TO-ENERGY OR WASTE-OF ENERGY?**

### **Social and Economic Impact Assessment of Waste-to-energy Projects on Wastepickers near Ghazipur and Okhla Landfills**

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has chosen to incorporate waste-to-energy plants in its solid waste management strategy because they believe that these address the dual challenges of managing an increased amount of waste and helping to meet the increasing demands for electricity. While there has been research on the environmental impacts of waste-to-energy plants, scant research addresses the social and economic impacts that these plants will have on the urban poor who work in the informal recycling sector.

Wastepickers have historically been an integral part of Delhi's solid waste management system. They collect, transport, and segregate waste before selling it to recyclers.

This study looks the impact of waste-to-energy plants in Okhla (2000 tons) and Ghazipur (projected to be 2000 tons). For each of these, the waste will be diverted from the Okhla and Ghazipur landfills.

If waste is diverted from Okhla and Ghazipur landfills to the waste-to-energy plants their access to waste will be reduced. In order to assess how this would affect their communities and livelihoods, we conducted an extensive survey and carried out in-depth interviews in informal slum clusters in Ghazipur, Okhla and Tughlaqabad. The data showed that livelihoods in Ghazipur and Tughlaqabad are completely dependent on the informal waste recycling, while Okhla is moderately dependent.

These communities exhibit vibrant localized economies, as many former wastepickers have become entrepreneurs whose businesses meet the daily needs of residents. Money percolates through these communities but the informal waste recycling sector is the single source of income for residents, and if this income is significantly reduced the local economies will be jeopardized. Faced with a loss of income, these entrepreneurs will revert to wastepicking. Because of the supply-

driven nature of Delhi's labor market, wastepickers will not adapt to the reduction in waste by switching occupations. Instead they will seek to increase their mobility and collect waste from surrounding neighborhoods before it enters the formal solid waste management value-chain.

In order to continue to earn, it is likely that all family members will be forced to work in productive labor, including children who will be removed from school and put to work. This means waste to energy plants could result in increased child labour.

These negative impacts can be offset if wastepickers are meaningfully incorporated into Delhi's solid waste management system. Firms who are awarded contracts to manage Delhi's waste should be obliged to incorporate wastepickers. In addition to being offered jobs in the waste-to-energy plants, wastepickers should be given formal permission to engage in door-to-door collection and recycle the waste they collect. Furthermore, private firms who agree to allow wastepickers to collect their waste should be recognized as socially responsible. This is a win-win situation because it will ensure that the first link in the Delhi's SWM chain remains green, while safeguarding the livelihoods of wastepickers and protect the childhood of children.