

Cash from trash

City residents are slow to see the benefit of sorting their garbage

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FROM ISSUE #418 (19 SEPT 2008 - 25 SEPT 2008) | TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Arati Subedi is one of relatively few householders in Kathmandu who separate their kitchen waste into what can and can't be recycled. Her organic waste goes into government-subsidised bins to fertilise her small but lush garden, while empty glass and plastic containers are reused, returned to shopkeepers or sold to garbage collectors for recycling.

In her small way, Subedi is helping to reduce the amount of garbage which gets dumped each day at the city's rubbish tip at Sisdoile. If only there were more Arati Subedis in Kathmandu, the capital wouldn't have a trash problem. A 2005 study found that 71 per cent of waste produced in Kathmandu Valley was organic and compostable. Paper made up 8.5 per cent, and this could be recycled.

Rabin Man Shrestha, chief at the KMC's Solid Waste Management Unit says garbage disposal workers can't afford to sort the rubbish themselves because of lack of space and the huge amount of time required. "But if the garbage is separated at source, the volume of garbage is reduced and more of it can be recycled or composted," he said.

Rakesh Khadka is a recycling wholesaler who, with many others, works near the municipality's waste disposal site in Teku. Independent garbage collectors sell him rubbish which he separates out and sells to recyclers of plastic, paper and metal for a small profit. Dry paper sells for Rs 6 per kg, and Khadka sells 20 tons of trash a month from which he makes Rs 15,000 a month.



RECYCLED SEAT: Hollywood director Steven Spielberg sits on a stool made by women from Dhading



An organisation called Himalayan Health Care has been going around quietly for the past 16 years, collecting plastic from roadsides and cinema halls. The junk is woven into bins, stools and coasters among a list of over a hundred other products, all of which are exported abroad. Their partner, the Spiral Foundation, has opened a showroom for them in LA and provided publicity through Hollywood big-shots like Steven Spielberg and George Clooney.

PICS: ROMA ARYAL

Sharad Parajuli, the founder of Himalayan Health Care says, "The returns are reinvested in the three VDC's in Dhading from which one thousand women are employed." The profit has paid for the establishment of a hospital in Illam, health posts, skills training, and major surgeries for the locals.

Across the river in Lalitpur, the Women's Environment Preservation Committee (WEPCO) has been helping to improve waste management for more than a decade, by promoting the '3R' principle (Reduce, Recycle, Reuse), organising door-to-door rubbish collections, building community compost pits, promoting vermiculture and training other women ('Garbage in, compost out' #6). Largely thanks to the committee, more households in Kupundole now make their own compost and some have started to sort their rubbish before disposing of it.



In the middle of Thamel is a small firm called Jamarko which supplies its handmade, recycled paper products?such as greetings cards and lampshades?to offices and restaurants, among other clients. The labour-intensive process means profits are small, but the owners are optimistic about future export opportunities.

As the city's population grows, producing ever more waste, the work of individuals like Rakesh Khadka and of organisations like WEPCO and Jamarko will become increasingly important. The Sisdole landfill site is expected to be full within the next six months, and the city authorities will be looking for a new dump.



But Bishnu Thakali, president of WEPCO, says there's an easier, more profitable alternative: "If it were really to be utilised, there's a 50 per cent profit in garbage." Instead of just chucking it all into a hole in the ground, why not use it in innovative ways that not only reduce the burden on the environment but also generate profit?