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INDIA

Green Schemes Turn Into White Elephants

By Keya Acharya

BANGALORE, Mar 17, 2011 (IPS) - Several incinerator facilities that were supposed to turn waste into energy have proven to be white elephants that are now adding to the country's pollution woes, instead of alleviating them.

"Massive waste-to-energy plant subsidies are ruining the waste management field in India," said Almitra Patel, a civil engineer from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. "Companies are now using these subsidies to set up plants that fail."

Solid waste experts are alarmed these facilities - which failed to work in the 1980s and 1990s - continue to exist.

Waste-to-energy (WTE) plants, are releasing toxic fumes because wastes are not being burned properly. Waste incineration technology - controversial in western countries - is even more toxic in India due to mixed, un-segregated wastes, which emit a medley of poisonous gases such as dioxins and furans when burned.

At Timarpur in New Delhi, a WTE incineration plant imported from the Danish firm Volund Miljotecknick in 2003 - which subsequently failed - has been resurrected, and another WTE incinerator is being built in Okhla.

Activists are protesting violations of environmental procedures at the Timarpur plant, which is surrounded by a community of about 500,000.

In February 2011, the Asian Development Bank withdrew funding to the plant under its Asia Pacific Carbon Fund, but the Timarpur Okhla Waste Management Company claims it will be able to reduce carbon emissions by 262,791 tonnes per year for the next ten years, and has filed for carbon credits.

WTE "works only on paper", said Mumbai-based Ragini Jain, who works on dry waste policy, explaining how Indian waste will not combust sufficiently to produce adequate electricity. Indian waste is mainly biodegradable compostable waste with high moisture content. When it arrives at the WTEs it is also mixed with non-biodegradable plastics, aluminium and similar substances - the wastes are not separated.

India set up solid waste management rules in 2000, making urban towns responsible for waste segregation and disposal, and recommending composting as the most suitable form of waste disposal after segregation.

The Solid Waste Rules of 2000 were set up after Patel petitioned the supreme court in 1996, claiming that the government was neglecting the responsibility of proper waste management. The court later appointed Patel head of a national committee on solid waste.

In 2005, Patel again filed a public interest lawsuit before the supreme court, petitioning the court to put a stay on government subsidies for all proposed and future WTE projects until the current plants had been adequately reviewed for feasibility.

The court ordered a stay on government subsidies for further WTEs, allowing only five of these projects to proceed for research and development purposes.

The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy however says there is no court ban on promoting further WTE projects.

India now has a reported 33 WTE projects in the works, of which several have the makings of financial corruption and administrative malfeasance, say NGO activists and waste management experts in Bangalore, New Delhi and Mumbai.

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Shanta Ram Maley, who specialises in solid waste management, pointed to the lack of understanding in India of technologies for dealing with municipal wastes, citing current failures in WTE technology in places like Hyderabad and Vijayawada in southern India, and Chandigarh and Jaipur in northern India.



Chandigarh, touted as having India's most well administered municipality, is now "throwing good compost into a landfill [thereby wasting both compostable material and landfill space]", says Maley.

Following a ban on plastics and a new recycling system for non-biodegradable wastes, the local WTE plant in Chandigarh is now deprived of non-biodegradables needed for refuse-derived pelletisation, and left with incombustible biodegradable waste.

"There is no accountability for operations from these companies, and no responsibility for their monitoring taken by the Ministry," Maley says.

There is some ambiguity over where responsibility lies. The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy passes the buck on approval of technologies to another department, the Central Pollution Control Board.

Under the National Action Plan on Climate Change, WTE technology is one of the ways the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy has chosen to promote renewable energy.

Small-scale municipal WTE plants are working well. In Pune, Additional Municipal Commissioner Suresh Jagtap said a successful system of segregation has been set up for their twelve micro WTE units.

"Most of these work well only in small-scale systems where wastes can be segregated according to its nature," says Maley. What Indian municipal wastes need, Maley suggested, is an integrated system of management that incorporates both composting and small-scale combustion technologies.

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