

REVOLUTIONISING EMPOWERMENT

TRANSFORMING WASTE PICKERS' LIVES
THROUGH INNOVATIONS



H&M FOUNDATION

SOCIAL
alpha ↗



CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

INNOVATING FOR CHANGE

CHARTING THE PROGRAM'S JOURNEY TO IMPACT

THE CHANGEMAKERS

ASHAYA

BARE NECESSITIES

ECOSATTVA

PADCARE LABS

RETI ECOTECH

LOOPWORM

PHOOL

MUDDLEART

SWACHHA ECO SOLUTIONS

BRIGHTER FUTURES- STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT AND RESILIENCE

SMALL BEGINNINGS, GREATER ENDS - JAYSHRI

EXPANDING SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE - CHITRA

STRIVING FOR GENDER EQUITY – RENUKA AND SONI

TOWARDS BRIGHTER HORIZONS - SHASHIKALA

NAVIGATING CHANGE – THE SOCIAL ALPHA WAY

TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Waste pickers in India play an indispensable yet often underappreciated role in the country's waste management system. They form a vast informal workforce that tirelessly navigates through streets, landfills, and waste collection points to segregate and recycle materials that otherwise end up in landfills or pollute the environment. By salvaging recyclable materials such as paper, plastics, metals, and glass, waste pickers contribute significantly to the circular economy, reducing the demand for raw materials and energy required to produce new products. Their efforts not only mitigate environmental pollution but also contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, showcasing a grassroots approach to environmental stewardship.





While they play a critical role in society, waste pickers in India face many challenges, including social stigma, absence of legal recognition, and limited access to health, safety, and social security benefits. They work in precarious conditions and are exposed to health hazards without adequate protective measures. Integrating waste pickers into formal waste management systems, providing them with fair remuneration, and ensuring access to health and safety measures can amplify their positive impact on society. It's essential to view waste pickers not just as informal workers but as key environmental service providers and agents of change in the transition towards a more sustainable and inclusive waste management system.

Each day, India generates over 160,000 tonnes of solid waste, with 50% treated, while the remaining is either landfilled or unaccounted for. This figure is only deemed to increase with the country's economic and population growth. The scenario underscores an urgent need for innovative solutions to revolutionise how waste is perceived, processed, and repurposed, turning a daunting challenge into a sustainable opportunity. Keeping people at the core and going beyond the technological and infrastructural advancements puts forth an opportunity to rethink inclusive solutions, thereby empowering those on the periphery, notably the waste pickers.

By integrating these informal workers into the formal sector through innovative business models and technologies, we can harness their invaluable grassroots knowledge and skills while improving their livelihoods and dignity. Moreover, innovations in circular economy practices - ranging from material recovery to product redesign and beyond - are key to transforming waste into resources, thereby reducing the environmental footprint. Such innovations, rooted in understanding and solving the needs of people and the planet, are crucial for paving the way towards a sustainable and resilient waste management ecosystem in India. Social Alpha believes in the power of innovations and entrepreneurship in driving economic growth, social justice and climate action.

Social Alpha joined H&M Foundation to develop a program to bring innovations into the ecosystem to address the pressing challenges of waste management while improving the livelihoods and well-being of the waste picker community. Through the co-creation of two Waste Innovation Accelerators under the program, the stage was set to include disruptive innovations in the waste management sector. After rigorous on-ground piloting, nine start-ups emerged as pioneers, providing meaningful employment to 41 informal waste pickers. The solutions kept ~4000 tonnes of waste from the landfills and avoided ~2400 tonnes of CO₂e emissions.





Social Alpha's comprehensive support for the start-ups included market linkages, knowledge and capacity-building workshops, and financial support, among other resources. The workshops conducted as part of the program helped start-ups focus on inclusion and sustainability besides de-risking their business and operating models. Concurrently, the program offered waste pickers stable employment, skill-building courses, and a conducive work environment through these start-ups. The achievements and learnings from this program are a motivation to continue the partnership between Social Alpha and H&M Foundation to accelerate impact by supporting more innovators and waste picker families in the next phase.

INTRODUCTION

India grapples with a colossal waste management challenge, exacerbated by rapid urbanisation, growing population, and increasing consumption patterns. Each day, the country generates approximately 160,000 tonnes¹ of solid waste, a figure that will grow more dismal as the country progresses economically. The existing infrastructure is inadequate and calls for a systemic approach to address insufficient segregation at source, poor collection systems, outdated technologies, and an unregulated informal sector. The need of the hour is to transform the sector by rethinking and reinventing the way we handle, recycle, and create value from the various waste streams while closely engaging with the waste picker community, which is the backbone of the waste management industry.



Waste pickers in India, estimated to be between 15 lakh and 40 lakh, play a vital role in the country's waste management ecosystem. The waste that has thus far been collected, segregated, and disposed of is largely attributed to their efforts. Despite being recognised as important stakeholders in the country's legal and policy framework – the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 and Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, they earn low and unstable incomes and lack access to social and livelihood security. With waste management being an essential service, the community continues to be vulnerable to health risks arising from inadequate safety measures while handling waste. Moreover, in the past three years, the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the fragility of the waste management sector and the lives of the community, making it even more critical to find sustainable solutions to tackle the crisis. This sector requires innovation to address the complex challenges of waste picker livelihoods and waste management problems.

Therefore, in 2020, Social Alpha and the H&M Foundation joined hands to develop a program and thereby launch an accelerator to facilitate the integration of innovation into the waste management ecosystem. The accelerators, also part of the Saamuhika Shakti Initiative², enabled start-ups to pilot their innovative solutions on ground along with providing them with opportunities to widen their impact footprint.



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¹Annual report 2020-21 on Implementation of Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016

²Saamuhika Shakti is a collective impact initiative, the first of its kind in India, where multiple implementing organisations have joined forces to enable informal waste pickers in Bengaluru to have greater agency to lead secure and dignified lives, with a specific focus on gender and equity.

INNOVATING FOR CHANGE

By 2025, it is estimated that India's waste management industry will value around USD 14 billion, with an annual growth rate of 7%³. The ecosystem requires a clever approach to manage waste and make our cities more resource efficient. The waste value chain, with prevention as the most favourable option, is followed by collection and segregation for re-use and recycling or, to recover resources to a maximum level. Treatment is next, to produce energy or organic fertilizers as by products followed by disposal - such as landfilling - the least favoured option. Along this value chain lie many opportunities for entrepreneurs to intervene with disruptive innovations, creating new markets or increasing process/operation efficiency, therefore supporting economic growth of the waste picker community.



³Waste Management in India Market Size & Share Analysis - Growth Trends & Forecasts (2024 - 2029)



CHARTING THE PROGRAM'S JOURNEY TO IMPACT

With a strong alignment with H&M Foundation's vision of enabling waste pickers to become key players in a global circular system, Social Alpha joined the Saamuhika Shakti initiative in 2020. Given Social Alpha's expertise in scouting for innovative solutions for pressing societal and development challenges in India, the most promising start-ups developing solutions along the waste value chain were identified, evaluated, and incubated through the launch of two Waste Innovation Accelerators. Nine start-ups successfully executed on-ground pilots and emerged as champions of change, providing gainful employment to 41 informal waste pickers.

Social Alpha and H&M
Foundation co-create an
**ACCELERATOR
PROGRAM**
in waste management

Launch of
TECHTONIC
-Innovations in
Waste Management
in December 2020

**SHOWCASE
EVENT**
for Cohort 1
in May 2022

COHORT 2 WINNERS
announced

Social Alpha
**JOINS
HANDS**
with Saamuhika
Shakti in 2020

COHORT 1 WINNERS
announced

Launch of
TECHTONIC
-Innovations in
Circular Economy
in April 2022

**SHOWCASE
EVENT**
for Cohort 2 in
March 2024



As part of the program, the start-ups were provided support in the form of forward and backward linkages. They were connected to global retail offices in the H&M ecosystem to enable validation and adoption of their product/innovation. Additionally, they were provided with resources to enable them to invest in marketing and traceability through digitisation. Knowledge and capacity-building sessions around social conditioning, aspects constituting gender, the importance of an organisational level gender framework and strategies on building policies and practices throughout the value chain to address gender biases were carried out.

Sessions on urban landscape, Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), brand building and industry collaboration were also carried out which benefitted the founders. Moreover, the start-ups were provided capital support at various stages of their journey. This included grants, seed capital infusion, and external investment facilitation depending on their needs, especially geared towards deployment of solutions on the ground.



In parallel the waste pickers were provided with stable employment opportunities through long-term engagement with start-ups. They received a range of training and skill building courses on the job and were provided with a safe and conducive work environment, flexible work hours, and opportunities to grow within the operations of the start-ups.

THE CHANGEMAKERS

The start-ups selected by Social Alpha as part of the accelerator aim to create sustainable and scalable waste management solutions, while providing stable employment opportunities and increased incomes for informal waste pickers. The start-ups were selected based on their ability to:

1. **Create systemic change in waste management**, a sector whose problems often get drowned in the noise of a vast multitude of challenges that India grapples with.
2. **Provide greater agency to waste pickers to lead secure and dignified lives**, through formal employment, skill development and provision of safe and conducive working environments.

The start-ups dealt with multiple waste streams such as plastic, textile and biomass waste including several sub-categories under each. While some of them have created patentable innovations in extracting valuable materials from waste using deep science, others have developed unprecedented process efficiencies in managing it to ensure that materials do not end up in landfills and aquatic dumps but are brought back into the value chain.

Social Alpha provided the start-ups with the following offerings:

1. Market validation support through pilot opportunities and access to partner networks for on-ground implementation.
2. Knowledge services which included a curated set of knowledge offerings to create a marketing plan and design digital support tools.
3. Potential opportunities to access Social Alpha's seed support and pitch to a large and diverse investor and donor network.
4. Dedicated Portfolio Managers to assist with developing go-to-market strategy and overall business advisory.
5. Mentorship by a set of qualified global and local experts from the waste management sector.

A comprehensive exercise to capture the progress made during the pilot implementation was also undertaken through quantitative and qualitative set of indicators. The figure below enlists the indicators for social, environmental, and economic progress.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

SOCIAL

NUMBER OF JOBS CREATED FOR INFORMAL WASTE PICKERS

INFORMAL WORKERS SUPPORTED IN THE FORMALISATION PROCESS (QUALITATIVE)

ACCESSIBILITY TO IMPROVED WORKING CONDITIONS WITH RESPECT TO WASH FACILITIES AND FLEXIBLE WORK TIMINGS FOR INFORMAL WASTE PICKERS

ECONOMIC

INCREASE IN INCOME OF EMPLOYED WASTE PICKERS

REVENUE GENERATED THROUGH STARTUP PILOT

SALES FROM THE STARTUP PILOT

ENVIRONMENTAL

GHG EMISSIONS AVOIDED (kg CO₂e)

WASTE DIVERTED FROM LANDFILL (kg)

WATER SAVED (l)

Through the accelerator, 9 start-ups across two cohorts successfully implemented pilots in Bengaluru and other cities in India. They collectively hired 41 informal waste pickers and trained and upskilled them on the job. The weighted average increase in income for the waste pickers under the program has been 121%. The 9 start-ups collectively diverted 39,39,695 kgs of waste from landfills and avoided 24,10,526 kgs of CO₂e emissions. Impact achieved by cohorts 1 and 2 has been illustrated in detail in the subsequent section.



PROGRAM IMPACT

2 Waste
Innovation
Accelerators

INR **96 crore**
follow-on fundraise enabled

139
applications
received

9 start-ups
supported

INR **07
crore**
investment
facilitated

2
**Techtonic
Challenges**
run to scout
for promising
start-ups

Pilots implemented
in four cities -
Bengaluru, Pune,
Aurangabad, and
Varanasi

41 informal
waste
pickers
employed

4000
tonnes
of waste diverted
from landfills

121%
weighted average
increase in income
of waste pickers

40+ waste
pickers formally
employed

2400
tonnes
of CO₂e
emissions
avoided



ASHAYA
PUNE, INDIA

Ashaya Private Limited (Ashaya) is an advanced chemical recycling company that processes post-consumer multi-layered plastic (MLP) into recycled material to replace virgin plastic in conventional packaging applications.

Founded in 2020, Ashaya is working on increasing the value of waste through advanced recycling solutions. It focuses on processing post-consumer multi-layered plastic (MLP) waste, which is the least recycled, low-value, high-volume type of plastic waste, through a chemo-mechanical process to extract the polyolefins and polyethylene terephthalate (PET). This is followed by conversion into consistent and high-quality recyclable pellets, that can replace conventionally used PET in plastic manufacturing as a drop-in solution or be converted into high-value materials and products such as sunglasses, coasters, and jewellery.



As part of the pilot, Ashaya scaled up its research and development (R&D) lab from processing 20 kgs of MLP per month to 100 kgs of MLP per month. Ashaya hired 8 informal waste pickers while enabling a 100% increase in their average income. The waste pickers were provided formal employment contracts, health insurance, support in opening bank accounts, and informal assistance in financial decision making. They were also provided improved working conditions with availability and accessibility to WASH facilities and flexible work timings.

Ashaya has avoided 1,200 kg of CO₂e emissions from reaching the atmosphere by the virtue of recycling 812 kg of MLP waste. 50 grams of MLP waste is recycled for making one pair of Ashaya's sunglasses. The carbon footprint per unit of Ashaya's sunglasses is 0.17 kg CO₂e as compared to a 3.7 kg CO₂e which is the carbon footprint of conventional sunglasses made using virgin materials⁴. Similarly, the water footprint per unit of Ashaya's sunglasses is 0.064 m³ as compared to 13 m³ per unit of sunglasses made using virgin material⁵.



Ashaya also featured on Shark Tank India Season 3 where the founder, Anish Malpani, highlighted the challenges involved in managing and recycling plastic waste streams such as 'Multi-layered packaging' and the socio-economic challenges faced by informal waste pickers around it. The pitch was well received, and he bagged an offer of INR 75 lakhs from two investors.



⁴<https://online.fliphtml5.com/gzxd/ebri/#p=7>
⁵https://assets.ctfassets.net/utajj99zvkvj6/54Bbp0yCIH2i8Pb7GtBzXF/e769d8fcc03271fe8bbbf62326806470/A_T_-_LCA_Report.pdf



BARE NECESSITIES BENGALURU, INDIA

Bare Necessities Zerowaste Solutions Private Limited (Bare Necessities) creates sustainable personal and home care products using plastic-free packaging.

Founded in 2016, Bare Necessities seeks to provide high-quality, innovative products and educational services (Bare Learning) to help communities manage waste and reduce carbon footprint, while creating environmental and social impact.





As part of the pilot, Bare Necessities launched new products with innovative formats and waterless formulations. These included sustainable hand wash and dish wash powders, a multi-surface cleaner powder and a vegan hydrating moisturiser. Bare Necessities ensured that the dispensers are entirely zero-waste, made from glass that has been upcycled from old wine bottles, used compostable corks for the lids and compostable paper printed with vegetable ink for the powder pouches. They employed 1 informal waste picker to support pilot operations. The waste picker was provided a formal employment contract, health insurance, and improved working conditions with availability and accessibility to WASH facilities. The start-up has diverted 621 kg of waste from going to landfill avoiding 1708 kg CO₂e emissions from reaching the atmosphere. By switching to waterless formulations, the start-up has saved 5296 litres of water from transporting sachets instead of bottled products.

5 GENDER EQUALITY 	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 	13 CLIMATE ACTION
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ECOSATTVA AURANGABAD, INDIA

EcoSattva Environmental Solutions Private Limited (EcoSattva) is working in the domain of solid waste management with the mission to establish effective management systems across villages, towns, and cities by implementing evidence-based and partnership-driven solutions. Since its inception in 2017, EcoSattva has delivered its services to more than 128 urban local bodies (ULBs) and Gram Panchayats across India.



As part of the pilot, EcoSattva identified and implemented BOTRAM* framework in 5 Gram Panchayats around Aurangabad. B-O-T-R-A-M is a six-step process that enables the MSW (Municipal Solid Waste) machinery to deliver a waste management system that is regular, reliable, safe and sustainable, while achieving a resource recovery potential of 90%. Dry waste is collected and recycled with the help of authorised recycling agencies, while biodegradable waste is composted within the Gram Panchayat. EcoSattva employed 2 informal waste pickers who have access to improved working conditions with availability and accessibility to WASH facilities. The waste pickers have been upskilled with driving, English speaking skills, and digital literacy to diversify their roles beyond waste collection and segregation. The start-up has prevented 35,695 kgs of household dry waste from reaching landfills and avoided close to 21,810 kg of CO₂e emissions.



*BOTRAM - Baseline assessment, onboarding and orientation, training and capacity building, resource recovery, awareness campaign, monitoring and maintenance



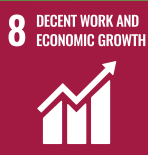
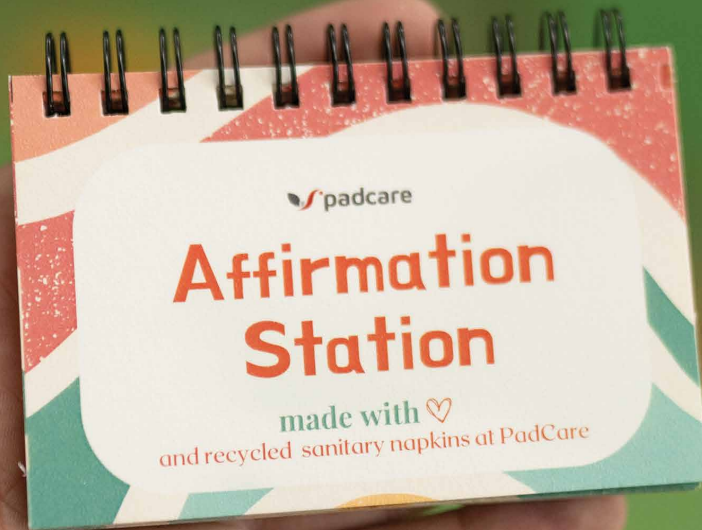
PADCARE LABS PUNE, INDIA

Padcare Labs Private Limited (Padcare) is a waste-management and circular economy start-up that uses a proprietary chemo-mechanical process to recycle used sanitary pads to produce plastic and cellulose. Padcare provides services to organisations, corporates, municipal corporations and housing societies that are looking for ways to ensure zero landfilling of menstrual waste and reduce their carbon emissions.



As part of the pilot, Padcare began providing menstrual waste management services in two housing societies in Bengaluru. Through the means of their pilot, Padcare has created steady and seamless menstrual waste management processes at the housing societies. Padcare also conducted thorough trainings for the housekeeping staff and carried out awareness campaigns for residents through posters and pamphlets to encourage proper segregation and handing over of menstrual waste. Padcare employed 2 informal waste pickers to supervise pilot operations at the housing societies and enabled an 11% increase in their average income. The waste pickers were supported in opening bank accounts, completing documentation, obtaining health insurance, and were also provided with housing facilities during the implementation of the pilot.

Padcare has avoided 4200 sanitary napkins, which is equivalent to 67 kgs, from reaching the landfill or being incinerated and avoided 244 kgs of CO₂e emissions from reaching the atmosphere. Padcare Labs featured on the business reality show, Shark Tank India Season 2, where the founder, Ajinkya Dhariya, highlighted the challenges and gaps in the menstrual waste management ecosystem in India. Ajinkya also elucidated the unpleasant experience that informal workers go through while segregating menstrual waste, and the health risks associated with it. Ajinkya's innovation and mission statement impressed the investors, one of whom even put forth an open investment offer. Ajinkya has also recently been selected in Forbes India 30 Under 30 2024 in the clean energy and climate change category.





RETI ECOTECH
BENGALURU, INDIA

Reti Ecotech LLP (Reti) converts pre- and post-consumer textile waste into sustainable construction materials for various indoor applications such as acoustic panels.



As part of the pilot, Reti incorporated fire resistance into their acoustic panels and completed testing for compressive strength of textile bricks and acoustic absorption coefficient of panels. Reti Ecotech also worked with a hydraulics expert to design a customised hydraulic press and performed extensive user research for gauging the requirements and pain points of their potential customers. Reti employed 2 informal waste pickers to support pilot operations and enabled a 12% increase in their average income. The waste pickers were provided with formal employment contracts, health insurance, and improved working conditions with availability and accessibility to WASH facilities. They successfully diverted 500 kgs of textile waste from reaching the landfill and avoided 493 kg of CO₂e emissions.





loopworm™

LOOPWORM
BENGALURU, INDIA

Loopworm Private Limited (Loopworm) is an agri-biotechnology company that takes inspiration from nature, to convert organic wastes into valuable products promoting health, nourishment, and wellbeing for all forms of life.

Established in 2019, the company specialises in utilising insects such as silkworms and black soldier flies to produce novel bio-based products. Insects are natural detritivores and a key part of the ecosystem. They are a rich source of proteins, fats, and micronutrients, and an essential part of the natural diets of both land and aquatic fauna.





As part of the pilot, Loopworm set up their facility in Bengaluru and hired 2 informal waste pickers while enabling a 42% increase in their average income. The waste pickers hired received assistance in identifying a home close to the facility, support in creating bank accounts and 120+ hours of training focusing on the technicalities of black soldier fly farming. The start-up also diverted 51,000 kgs of waste from landfills and helped avoid 30,753 kgs of CO₂e emissions.

The pilot opportunity has unlocked significant capital for Loopworm. The start-up was able to fundraise USD 3.4 million investment due to the successful implementation of their pilot in Bengaluru. The founders, Ankit Alok Bagaria and Abhi Gawri, have earned widespread acclaim including a prestigious spot on Forbes India 30 Under 30 2024 list for their innovative biotech solutions for creating sustainable protein alternatives.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 	13 CLIMATE ACTION 
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PHOOL

PHOOL VARANASI, INDIA

Kanpur Flowercycling Private Limited (Phool) upcycles floral waste collected from places of worship and other establishments and converts it into handcrafted incense products.

By employing 300+ women from marginalised communities, including waste pickers, the start-up has revolutionised the creation of value from waste while establishing an immensely successful direct-to-consumer brand.





With the commencement of the pilot, Phool set up a new production unit in Varanasi and began collecting floral waste from Kashi Vishwanath temple. They hired 17 informal waste pickers for the pilot and enabled a 232% increase in their average income. The waste picker employees were provided a wide range of support including transportation to and from the factory, clean water and sanitation facilities on site, and fixed work timings so that employees get to avail refreshment breaks. The start-up also diverted 4,38,000 kgs of waste from landfills and helped avoid 2,64,114 kgs of CO₂e emissions.



MUDDLEart

textile waste solutions

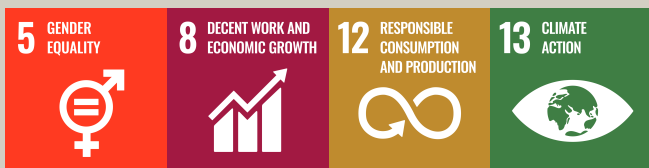
MUDDLEART NEW DELHI, INDIA

MuddleArt Private Limited (MuddleArt) builds solutions for managing all types of pre-consumer textile waste customised to the client's operations, with the goal of fostering circularity in the fashion industry while creating inclusive jobs.

With a strong commitment to environmental conservation, MuddleArt ensures that 100% of the textile waste processed by them is diverted from landfills, significantly reducing the need for virgin materials. In addition to that, the start-up has created more than 200 formal employment opportunities for individuals from underserved communities.



As part of the pilot, MuddleArt established a new unit in Bengaluru and secured contracts with Shahi Exports and Cotton World, India's leading apparel manufacturers to source pre-consumer textile waste from them. The start-up hired 3 informal waste pickers and enabled a 33% increase in their average income. The waste pickers were provided training on categories of pre-consumer textile waste segregation-by fabric, length, and colour. The start-up also provided safe working conditions and favourable work timings for women waste pickers. The start-up also diverted 13,000 kgs of waste from landfills and helped avoid 12,805 kgs of CO₂e emissions.

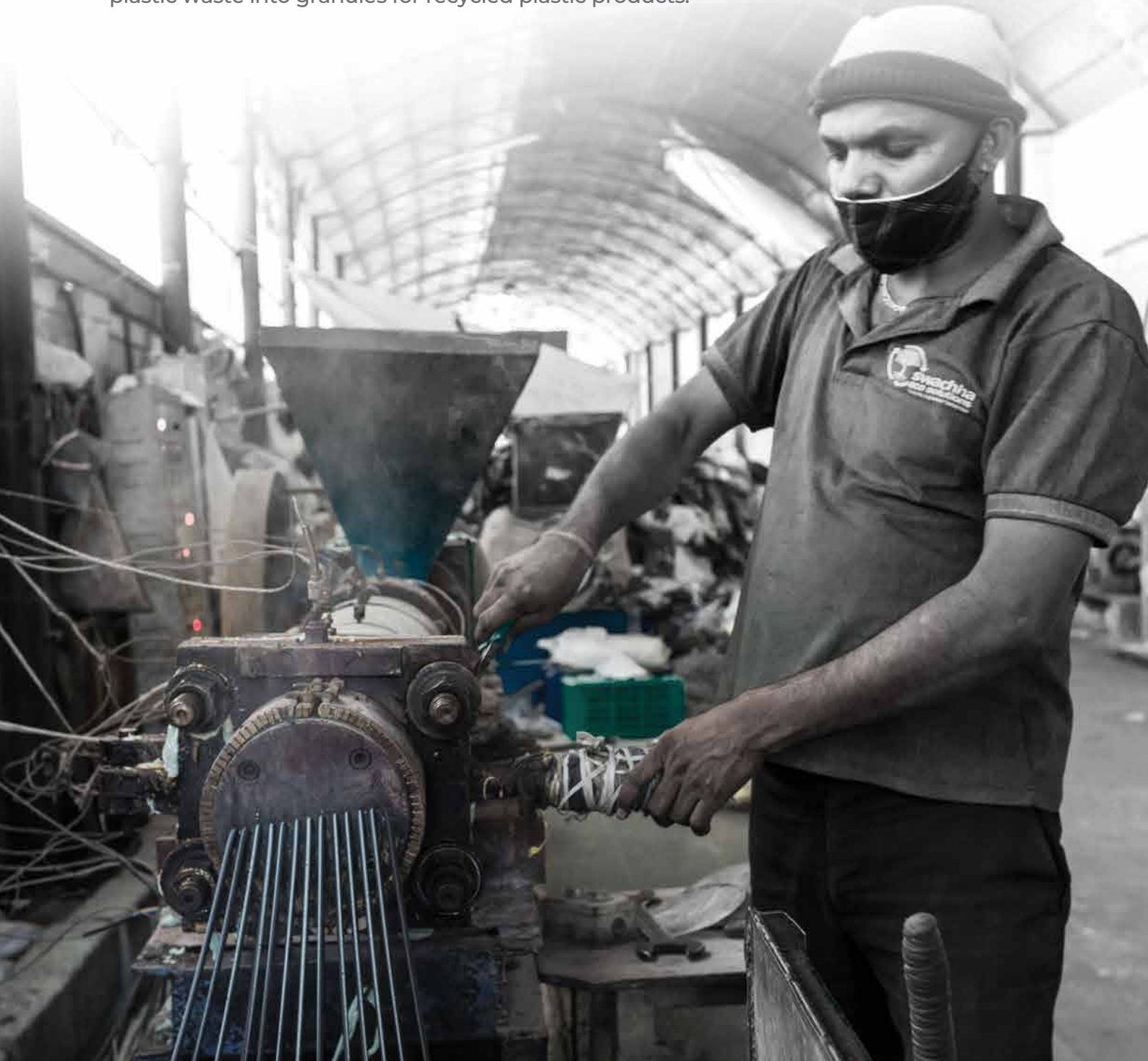




**swachha
eco solutions**
Towards a greener tomorrow

SWACHHA ECO SOLUTIONS BENGALURU, INDIA

Swachha Eco Solutions Private Limited (Swachha Eco Solutions) provides end-to-end solid waste management services in Karnataka and converts post-consumer and post-industrial plastic waste into granules for recycled plastic products.





The company involves citizens, community organisations and economically, socially disadvantaged groups in management of various waste streams. The waste pickers employed are involved in various activities including collection, segregation and processing of waste, as well as dissemination of information and awareness.

As part of the pilot the start-up set out to create Swachha Repolymix. Multilayer plastics (low value plastic grades) are processed into Repolymix which is added to asphalt for road construction and surfacing. The start-up hired 4 informal waste pickers for the pilot and trained them on processing methods and technical aspects of plastic recycling. The waste pickers were provided insurance and health benefits and opportunities for a long-term career pathway. The start-up also diverted 34,00,000 kgs of waste from landfills and helped avoid 20,77,400 kgs of CO₂e emissions.

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 	13 CLIMATE ACTION 
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BRIGHTER FUTURES -STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT AND RESILIENCE

The waste pickers employed by the start-ups embarked on a journey filled with hope and an openness to acquire new skills, leading them towards a transformative journey. The stories below give a glimpse of their unwavering resilience and determination to sail through the tough times for a brighter future.





- JAYSHRI



SMALL BEGINNINGS, GREATER ENDS

Jayshri is an integral part of Ashaya, a workplace that has become her second home over the past year. However, her story of triumph was the result of embracing and overcoming several hurdles that life sent her way.

Jayshri's journey began in Pahuna, India, working diligently in the waste management industry. Despite losing her husband, she persevered, raising their daughter alone. At Ashaya, Jayshri works from 9 AM to 6 PM, handling the management of multi-layered plastic (MLP) waste, including washing, shredding, extrusion, and filtration. The facility ensures her safety with necessary equipment. Her hard work at the start-up paid off, as her salary increased from INR 5,000 to INR 20,000 per month, allowing her to manage household expenses and save for the future. Her daughter, now in 8th grade, reflects Jayshri's resilience.

Initially, Jayshri faced challenges with bank transactions and preferred cash payments. Ashaya's team assisted her, explaining her minimum balance account requirements and converting it into a 'salary' account to avoid penalties. They also provided the bank with an official employment letter, stating that Jayshri works for them.

She cherishes short breaks during her shifts and takes moments to recharge when needed. The workplace provides ample facilities, including well-maintained toilets and drinking water, ensuring that Jayshri feels comfortable and valued.

Jayshri's story is one of resilience, hard work, and joy amidst challenges. Her journey at Ashaya is a testament to triumph over adversity and the pursuit of a better tomorrow.

EXPANDING SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE

In the heart of the city of Bengaluru, where start-ups embark on game changing journeys, a new chapter was unfolding at Bare Necessities. The start-up had welcomed its first informal waste picker, Chitra, into its vibrant family, transforming both its workforce and Chitra's life.

Before getting immersed in the aromatic air that constantly lingers at Bare's facility, Chitra had spent four years navigating the intricacies of waste management with Hasiru Dala, an organisation that works with waste pickers. Her days were dedicated to meticulously segregating waste from valuable materials, ensuring that scraps found a second life through the magic of recycling. She treasures the companionship she had built with her colleagues at Hasiru Dala, and fondly reminisces about them.

Chitra seamlessly transitioned into her role at Bare Necessities, where she was provided a formal employment contract, flexible work timings and health insurance.

Chitra's responsibilities spanned from housekeeping duties to contributing her skills to production, packaging, and labelling. Eager to broaden her manufacturing skills, she faced each task with determination, fuelled by the support of her newfound companions. The women at Bare were more than just colleagues; they were her pillars of strength, cheering her on during challenging moments and boosting her confidence when needed.

Chitra's journey becomes a testament to the power of women uplifting one another. The culture within Bare Necessities goes beyond the realms of daily work, fostering an environment where each woman's success contributes to the start-up's collective mission. Chitra's story, a vibrant thread in the tapestry of Bare Necessities, symbolises not only a personal triumph but also a collective victory for the women who championed her cause.



A woman with a bindi on her forehead, wearing a pink and gold saree, is shown in a warehouse setting. She is holding a bottle of olive oil in her left hand and a box of soap in her right hand. The background consists of metal shelving units filled with cardboard boxes. The text '- CHITRA' is overlaid on the image in a white box.

- CHITRA



— RENUKA
AND SONI

STRIVING FOR GENDER EQUITY

Renuka and Soni, have stood against the tide of gender-based discrimination that is widely prevalent in their villages. Bound by the resilient threads of hope and ambition, they strived towards rewriting their destinies with the helping hand of EcoSattva. Once informal waste pickers, they now found themselves formally employed by EcoSattva, a beacon of empowerment in their lives.

In a society where women obtaining driving licenses, especially for commercial vehicles, is a rarity, Renuka and Soni defied the odds. EcoSattva recognised the potential within the two women and, determined to break down barriers, enrolled them in a driving school. The goal was ambitious yet empowering - to operate their own waste collection vehicles, weaving a network between Bulk Waste Generators and Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs). They weren't just learning to drive; they were steering their own destinies.

The duo became pioneers in their community, shattering stereotypes as the first two women waste pickers venturing into this unconventional path. Armed with newfound skills and confidence, they engaged with village councils, introducing their innovative business model and establishing collection points for dry waste.

“With the empowerment program of Unnati conducted by EcoSattva, I learned to send emails, make appointments, collect data, and drive the collection truck. We drive the trucks ourselves and go to the villages to collect the waste, teach villagers how to segregate, and meet with the Gram Panchayats,” shared Renuka, a testament to the transformative power of the program. As torchbearers of change, Renuka and Soni continue to inspire women to challenge norms and ascend to new roles in the waste value chain.

A black and white portrait of a woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a dark shawl over a patterned top. She has a bindi on her forehead and is looking directly at the camera. The background shows a window with a grid pattern and some blurred objects. A white rectangular box with a thin black border is positioned over the lower part of her chest.

- SHASHIKALA



TOWARDS BRIGHTER HORIZONS

Shashikala had weathered numerous challenges before she became associated with Reti Ecotech. The opportunity to secure formal employment emerged as a lifeline, a significant relief from the irregularities in employment she dealt with earlier.

“This job at Reti Ecotech, through the Saamuhika Shakti initiative, has truly transformed my life, and I am grateful for the positive turn it has brought. The support from the company, has not only given me a stable source of income but has also helped me receive essential documents like Aadhar card, PAN card, and a bank account,” Shashikala shared. “As the primary breadwinner of my family, these changes have allowed me to address various problems. I appreciate the opportunities I get here, which make a meaningful impact on both my professional and personal life. The journey with this start-up has indeed been a positive and empowering experience for me,” she said.

In Shashikala's eyes, the journey with Reti Ecotech was nothing short of a metamorphosis. The start-up became more than a workplace, it became a catalyst for positive change. The unwavering support extended by Reti's founders serves as an ongoing source of strength, reinforcing her confidence and belief in a brighter future.

NAVIGATING CHANGE THE SOCIAL ALPHA WAY

Social Alpha has been steadfast in its commitment to fostering social and environmental benefits through strategic investments. Within the waste management ecosystem, this dedication has translated into meaningful support for numerous start-ups. For example, Social Alpha disbursed seed capital investment amounting to INR 3.6 Cr into 5 early-stage waste management start-ups in India that support and enhance livelihoods of informal waste pickers.

Social Alpha not only invests in promising start-ups aimed at solving critical challenges but also plays a pivotal role in catalysing additional investments. The efforts have successfully attracted co-investment of INR 4.4 Cr and follow-on fundraising worth INR 96 Cr, amplifying the impact and reach of these start-ups.

Through this focused approach, Social Alpha is significantly contributing to the development of sustainable and efficient waste management solutions, underscoring its mission to leverage investment as a tool for environmental stewardship and social progress.



TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Several learnings have been distilled throughout the program's journey, underscoring the complexity of addressing challenges in the waste management sector. One of the pivotal challenges encountered was the limitations imposed by the selected geography, which initially hindered the progress of two promising start-ups. These start-ups faced operational and market access issues that were not initially anticipated and prompted a strategic pivot. By extending the search for suitable locations beyond Bengaluru, the start-ups were able to maximise outreach and impact.

The integration of waste pickers into formal workspaces stood out as a hallmark of the program's commitment to social upliftment. Ensuring seamless integration required meticulous attention to the nuances of employment in this sector, such as the frequency of payments and the longevity of these employment opportunities. The program successfully navigated these complexities, establishing a model that could potentially redefine the future of employment for waste pickers. It transcended the mere act of employment to foster a sense of dignity and long-term security.

The delicate balance between providing opportunities for better livelihoods and respecting the dignity of labour was a constant consideration. The program endeavoured to uplift communities without inadvertently questioning the dignity of traditional labour practices. This fine line was navigated with a focus on empowerment, respect, and the creation of sustainable livelihoods that allowed individuals and families to aspire for a better future. It was never forgotten that the occupation of waste picking is the reason waste pickers gathered expertise in handling different waste streams which has become an indispensable asset and a sought-after skill for many start-ups.

Addressing gender sensitivities and practices amongst the start-ups was another layer of complexity. The program recognised the need for handholding support to integrate gender-focused elements into the operational ethos of the participating start-ups.

Sessions to create awareness of Prevention of Sexual Harassment (PoSH) Act and strategies to retain women employees were organised. Such efforts aimed at not just employment but empowerment, ensuring that women, in particular, received the support needed to thrive in these new roles. To enable cross-learning, a session was organised that enabled the start-ups who had already incorporated gender sensitive policies and processes to share their experience with the larger cohort.

Moreover, the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic introduced a plethora of challenges, from operational disruptions to health risks for the waste pickers. The program adapted swiftly, implementing safety measures and leveraging technology to minimise disruption, thereby ensuring that the mission of sustainable and socially inclusive innovation continued unabated.

In conclusion, the scale of the impact envisioned by this program is a testament to the belief in sustainable solutions that are deeply rooted in the long game. Quick fixes were ignored in favour of approaches that promised enduring change, a vision that required patience, resilience, and a commitment to innovation and social upliftment. The journey of these start-ups, supported by the program, underscores the potential of circular economy innovations to not only address environmental challenges but also to significantly enhance the social and economic fabric of our societies.

Building upon the achievements and learnings from Phase 1 of the program, Social Alpha is looking forward to amplifying and accelerating the impact in Phase 2. By leveraging the lessons learned and successes achieved, the aim is to scout for innovators who are on the path to creating systemic change in the waste management sector. All while supporting the waste picker families to attain enhanced economic stability and reduce their financial vulnerability.



ABOUT SOCIAL ALPHA

Founded in 2016, Social Alpha is a multistage innovation curation, and venture development platform focused on addressing the most critical social, economic, and environmental challenges. With its deep community engagement, partnerships, and ecosystem leadership, Social Alpha has evolved into a societal platform for promoting high-impact innovations to fight poverty, disease and climate change.

Social Alpha searches for innovators willing to take the entrepreneurial risk and supports them as they build compelling solutions to address India's intractable development sector challenges. Since its inception in 2016, Social Alpha has built over ten innovation platforms, managed 30+ accelerators, and nurtured more than 300 start-ups.

Breakthrough research and innovations have the potential to create a profound and irreversible impact on the people and planet. Society needs entrepreneurs to translate these innovations into solutions and ignite the economic engine by creating new markets. Social Alpha's theory of change revolves around developing entrepreneurial solutions to societal problems. It has built a full-stack architecture that orchestrates various enablers for innovation curation, solution development, market access, deployment and scale-up.

Social Alpha's three Strategic Impact Units (SIUs), namely Climate and Sustainability, Health and Wellness, and Livelihoods and Prosperity are designed to address various social, economic and environmental challenges and contribute positively to mass prosperity, wellness and climate action with well-defined development indicators.

Social Alpha's platform architecture is designed to support the three SIUs and catalyse the "lab to market to communities" progression of high-impact innovations. It consists of product innovation labs, venture incubators, accelerator programmes and multiple capital pools.

Foundation for Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship (FISE), a non-profit entity, hosts the Social Alpha architecture, and all the initiatives of FISE operate under the brand umbrella of Social Alpha.



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