(Western Province, Sri Lanka) Two dump trucks loaded with garbage trundle precariously to the top a mountain of rubbish at a landfill site on the outskirts of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka.

Sensing a fresh opportunity, several freelance waste pickers have gathered nearby. As the trucks release their fetid cargo, the pickers move in – searching for recyclable materials such as metal, glass and plastic containers. Dodging between the trucks and the other pickers is 32 year old Kumundu Dissanayake, a slight woman in black rubber boots and protective clothing. She’s been picking through waste here under the hot sun for two years.

Recently, Ms Dissanayake has become the beneficiary of an ILO supported training programme designed to formalize the work of picking and sorting garbage for the purpose of regularizing recycling in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The activities form a part of the ILO’s Green Jobs in Asia initiative. The project is supported through the Australian Government – ILO Partnership Agreement (2010 – 2015).

Ms Dissanayake is among 30 waste pickers at this site – all of whom have now been registered with the Waste Management Authority of the Western Province (WMA) as part of the regularization process, one of the project’s main objectives. The ILO works with the WMA to train its staff – and the registered freelance waste pickers – about the importance of their work and their picking and recycling methods. The training is delivered within the framework of improving greener working practices to complement the national and global imperatives of preserving the environment and reducing carbon emissions. Given the nature of the work, occupational safety and health is also discussed.

One of the most important outcomes of the project is the formal registration of workers and making the system of payments more regular and transparent. A monthly payment record is kept at the site office.

Ms Dissanayake earns the equivalent of US$ 300 each month – an amount higher than the average minimum wage. “We’re now earning much more than before,” said Ms Dissanayake, a single mother of two young boys. “The on-site facilities have improved as well. For example, the WMA has introduced shower facilities and we can also change our clothes before we go home. So that’s more hygienic for our families as well as us.”

The workers have also created a cooperative association, a move supported by the ILO project. “There is great interest in the association and we can discuss any issues we have with the management,” said Mr J.M. Jagath Hemantha, a waste picker who has the added responsibility of Chairman of the Recycling Staff Welfare Society.
As for the employers at WMA, the training has paid dividends in improved worker morale and productivity gains.

“The workers that received the training from the ILO about occupational safety and health have also learned about the importance of their work. That improved their sense of dignity enabling them to become more productive,” said Mr Kosala Gunawardana, the WMA’s site manager.

“This is the first project that addressed the working people’s health of these waste handlers,” added Dr Champika Amarasinghe, Director-General of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). “The (waste pickers) said they never had any training throughout their working life. So this was the first time they had any training on occupational safety and health,” said the Director, whose institute is affiliated with the Sri Lanka Ministry of Labour and Labour Relations, one of the ILO’s constituents. Following the training of 300 master trainers, the NIOSH training had been rolled out to 4,000 waste pickers in the Western Province.

One of the value-added byproducts of the materials recycled through the ILO’s collaboration with the WMA is bio-compost, a greener and more economical alternative to imported, chemically reliant and commercially produced compost. It’s already in demand by the operators of some of Sri Lanka’s critically important tea and rubber plantations which have witnessed soil degradation after 150 years of multiple annual harvests.

“We’ve just placed an order this week for 200 metric tonnes of the WMA’s bio-compost,” said Mr Roshan Rajadurai, Director and CEO of Kahawatte Plantations PLC. “In addition to creating additional jobs, we’ll be doing the country a service because we’ll be disposing of the garbage and other unnecessary materials and converting them into something useful and profitable for us, in terms of the sustainability of plant yield and our quality of tea.”

While 2.5 million people in Sri Lanka are dependent on the tea plantations for livelihoods, other industries are also seeing the benefits in linking the move to green jobs with their commercial move to greener businesses.

“A lot of employers are undertaking green practices on their own,” said Ms Thamali Senanayake, the Green Jobs Coordinator with the Employers’ Federation of Ceylon. “We’ve noticed that there are green practices within a lot of companies in Sri Lanka.”

From both an ILO and worker’s perspective, in order for employment to become “green,” the work must also be considered decent. The training of these workers and the formalization of their duties is helping to achieve that.

Prior to the ILO interventions, “the workers in the garbage or sanitary sector were looked down upon,” said Mr Mathi Yugarajah, Vice President and Director, International Affairs at the Ceylon Workers’ Congress. “But once it is seen to be a (form of) decent work, then there will be people who will try to get into these jobs because there is some kind of dignity attached to it.”

“Equipping workers and training them on the importance of their jobs in waste management was the first step in ensuring green jobs,” said Ms Shyama Salgado, National Coordinator of the ILO’s Green Jobs project in Sri Lanka, adding that ensuring the interests of governments, employers and workers organizations alike were also critical steps taken. “Thanks to the Australian Government – ILO Partnership Agreement we are quite confident that we have achieved this.”

Photo credits: ILO/A.DOW