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INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
SERVICES
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SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
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ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA
EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA
ABOUT ITC
MISSION AND OBJECTIVES
HOW ITC WORKS
AID FOR TRADE
MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS
PUBLICATIONS
E-SHOP
ABOUT THE FORUM
REPRINT GUIDELINES
INFO AND CONTACT
PRINT SUBSCRIPTIONS
MEET THE READERS
SEARCH
BACK ISSUES

From Organic Waste to Clean Energy in India

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In the foothills of the Himalayas in northern India, a project run by myclimate, a Swiss non-governmental organization, is creating new jobs and income opportunities, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions through new technology.

In the state of Uttarakhand, brick factories are a significant employer and contributor to the local economy, but they are also a source of air pollution. The method of firing bricks using poor- quality coal has been the same for many generations but now, with the introduction of climate neutral biomass pellets (briquettes), the amount of greenhouse gas produced by the factories is being reduced.

The biomass briquettes are produced from a mixture of organic waste material including sawdust, pine needles and cow dung. Jobs are created in both the production of the briquettes and, in rural areas, the collection of biomass material.

In villages throughout the region, pine needles collected from the forest floor are a major source of biomass for the briquettes. A previously unused material, they were a hazard in the wake of increasing forest fires caused by global warming and dryness. Now their collection is providing a welcome source of additional income for local villagers, who earn a daily wage that is higher than the official minimum wage.

From a business point of view, the my-climate project has had a considerable impact on the region.

"Approximately €260,000 flow into the project annually through myclimate, with a total project turnover of €970,000. To put this in proportion, in India this means that thousands of jobs are created," says Alain Schilli, deputy managing director for myclimate.

"There are almost 300 brick factories in the region. This project can reach only 5 per cent of them, so there's a huge potential for future development," he says.

The most important argument in favour of the biomass briquettes - and the only factor that counts for the managers of the brick works - is that they produce the same heat output as coal, but at a lower price.

Although the reduction of greenhouse gases is an enormous benefit for the environment, the cost savings from using biomass instead of fuel is the immediate lure for users of the technology.

The founders and directors of the project - local brothers Rajesh and Brijesh Rawat from RRUSPL - are also introducing an efficient and smokeless cooker (chulha) as an alternative to traditional coal- or gas-fired cookers for restaurants, temple complexes, schools and hospitals in the region.

"The cookers are comparable to gas stoves and are just as efficient but the biggest advantage is the cost," says Rajesh Rawat. "Using biomass instead of LPG [liquefied petroleum gas] means a net saving of around 50 per cent."

In schools, the use of these energy-efficient cookers is also having an educational impact on younger generations.

"The kids are very curious about why the chulha is being used," says Brijesh Rawat. "So we have a good reason to tell them that this is all about climate change."

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2008

2007

2006

2005

2004

2003

2002

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1999