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CEA partners with IWMI to improve Colombo's municipal waste management and farmers' access to organic fertilizers

Colombo, December 10, 2013. At the request of the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC), the Central Environmental Authority (CEA), in collaboration with the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), organized a stakeholder meeting to discuss improvements that can be made to the management of municipal waste in the City of Colombo. The meeting was held at the headquarters of IWMI in Pelawatte, Battaramulla, and was a follow-up to the memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between CEA and IWMI on July 19, 2013. This meeting was held under the patronage of Hon. Susil Premajayantha, Minister of Environment and Renewable Energy, with the participation of several people from his ministry as well as others from the ministries of Defence and Urban Development, Agriculture, and Local Government and Provincial Councils, and the CMC and other stakeholder institutions, such as the Waste Management Authority of the Western Province. The Municipal Commissioner, Mrs. Bhadrani Jayawardhana, and several engineers attended the meeting on behalf of the CMC.

The CMC produces 700 tonnes of municipal solid waste per day, which represents about 25% of the country's total waste collection. Since more than 60% of the waste consists of organic matter, the Hon. Susil Premajayantha said, "Municipal waste in the CMC, with its high moisture content and organic composition, is very well suited for composting. Experience from phase 1 of the 'Pilisaru' National Solid Waste Management Project shows that composting can provide a solution to a large part of the organic waste, which otherwise has a high potential for pollution of our water bodies." The Minister assured the support of his ministry in carrying out the feasibility study for converting organic waste into compost in the CMC. "This study would extend to the Colombo Metropolitan Region (CMR) beyond the CMC," he added.

Waste disposal is a major challenge in Colombo and the present disposal site is coming to the end of its operational life. The Municipal Commissioner stated that diverting as much waste as possible from any dumping site should be a strategic focus not only by the people in Colombo. She also highlighted that, to reduce, reuse and recycle were key pillars of Sri Lanka's waste management strategy.

According to Dr. Hemantha Wijewardena, Director, Organic Fertilizer Unit, Ministry of Agriculture, nearly 1 million hectares of paddy land are cultivated annually in Sri Lanka. “If at least 1 tonne of organic fertilizer was used per hectare of land area, there would be a huge requirement for this,” he said. “However, improving the quality of the compost is key to increasing the demand for it.”

Infrastructure needs to be developed for waste management. However, as highlighted by Dr. Saranga Alahapperuma, Director General, CEA, there is also a need to introduce modern concepts, such as the ‘polluter pays’ principle, product stewardship and extended producer responsibility, to enhance the commitment of all sectors of the society towards improved waste management.

Mr. N. S. Gamage, Director, ‘Pilisaru’ National Solid Waste Management Project of the CEA, said, “Implementation of a composting project to serve the CMC is our priority in phase 2 of the ‘Pilisaru’ project, which will be carried out from 2014 to 2018.” Compost produced from waste could provide a win-win situation for the CMC, farmers and the environment.

“To achieve a sustainable transformation, a comprehensive feasibility study will be an important step,” said Dr. Herath Manthrithilake, Head, Sri Lanka Development Initiative, IWMI. Dr. Pay Drechsel, Theme Leader for IWMI’s research theme on Water Quality, Health and Environment, added that the proposed feasibility study for the Greater Colombo region would be based on different value propositions and business models, which were prepared after analyzing approximately 150 success stories in various developing countries. He also stated that the potential for replicating these business models will be assessed under the proposed feasibility study. The study would cover seven areas: waste supply, analysis of compost demand, financing, technologies, health, environment, and institutional and socioeconomic analysis. Dr. Saranga Alahapperuma, Director General, CEA, said, “This multi-disciplinary approach will increase the sustainability of our project and is a much-welcomed addition.” He also stated that the same approach can be replicated across phase 2 of the ‘Pilisaru’ project sites, and can be applied to support those composting stations that were set up under phase 1 to increase their internal cost recovery potential and lifetime.

Dr. Peter McCornick, Deputy Director General – Research, IWMI, highlighted that, “Waste is a challenge, but can be converted into an opportunity.”

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Photo caption: Head table (L to R) - Dr Pay Drechsel, IWMI, Dr Saranga Alahapperuma, CEA, Minister Susil Premajayantha, Dr Peter McCornick, IWMI, Dr Herath Manthrithilake, IWMI