

The Urban Informal Workforce: Waste Pickers/Recyclers

Waste pickers collect, sort, recycle, repurpose and/or sell materials thrown away by others. Their work reduces the amount of waste in municipal landfills, reclaims discarded material and reintroduces it into value chains. Waste pickers' activities benefit the environment and public health. And in some cities, informal waste pickers are the only form of solid waste management — at little or no cost to the municipal budget. The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) examines the driving forces that shape waste pickers' working conditions, their responses to these drivers, and the institutions that help or hinder their responses. Across five cities, 763 waste pickers (427 women and 336 men) took part in the research (see box below). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected in collaboration with their membership-based organizations in each city. The findings inform the recommendations on the last page of this report.

Waste Pickers as Economic Agents

Waste pickers provide recyclable materials to formal enterprises and generate demand for service providers.

- 76% of waste pickers in the sample say their main buyers are formal businesses. Between one quarter



Photo from Belo Horizonte: D. Tomich

About IEMS and the Research Partners

These findings are based on research conducted in 2012 as part of the Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS), a project under Inclusive Cities. Conducted in 10 cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the study is examining how informal livelihoods are changing, how informal workers respond to these changes, and what institutions help or hinder their lives. Three groups of informal workers – home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers – and their membership-based organizations (MBOs) are involved (see Note on Sampling & Methodology, page 2). The project is led by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).

Waste pickers were studied in five cities. Research partners included their MBOs:

- Belo Horizonte, Brazil:** Instituto Nenuca de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (INSEA)
- Bogotá, Colombia:** Association of Recyclers of Bogotá (ARB)
- Durban, South Africa:** Asiye eTafuleni (AeT)
- Nakuru, Kenya:** Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT)
- Pune, India:** Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union, and SWaCH, a workers' cooperative

and one half also supply recyclable materials to informal businesses, private individuals and the general public.

- 34% of waste pickers use municipal services as part of their work, generating revenue for city governments.
- 29% use public toilets, 18% pay for the services of carriers and 17% use private transport in their work.

Where waste segregation is not part of the culture, waste pickers are key economic actors whose materials translate into profits for scrap shops, recycling companies, producers and artists.

- Waste is often an input for other industries. In Pune, for example, waste pickers collect organic matter for composting and biogas.
- Recyclers report ingenious ways of marketing materials collected. In Belo Horizonte and Nakuru, waste becomes artistic material.

We sell egg shells, and bottle tops, bones and cans to artists and designers. (Nakuru)¹

Waste pickers provide jobs for themselves and others, creating opportunities where others may not exist.

- In Durban, some use the income they generate from recycling to buy other goods to sell, generating more income for their families.

I use this money that I get from selling boxes to buy fruits from the market that I sell, so in that way I am also contributing to the economy. (Durban)

¹ All quotations are from focus groups held in the city designated.

- In Belo Horizonte, waste picker cooperatives open doors for workers and create opportunities for people, sometimes “taking them off the streets.”

This teaches ways of cooperating with one another. (Belo Horizonte)

Waste Pickers as Environmental Agents

By picking up discarded material from public spaces, waste pickers contribute to cleanliness and help beautify the city.

So much difference we make! They get a clean city without paying us a paisa. (Pune)

We generate awareness about the importance of recycling. (Bogotá)

Waste pickers’ efforts reflect well on the municipality.

The gutters would be blocked with their damn plastic bottles without us. Then everyone would come running to the corporation to shout and complain. (Pune)

Waste picking contributes to public health, preventing the spread of diseases, even at personal risk.

We clean the city — so the sewers don’t clog, so that there are no rats, [or] mosquitoes... so we help prevent diseases. (Bogotá)

The city gets healthier, but we get sicker. Big needles, glass, rose thorns, all those things injure us. We fall sick. (Pune)

Driving Forces in the Waste Sector

Government Policies and Practices

Access to waste is a key issue for waste pickers.

- 73% of waste pickers in the combined sample said lack of access to waste is a major or moderate problem.
- Accessing waste is especially problematic in Bogotá, where 96% of waste pickers said it is a major problem. 85% in Durban and 74% in Nakuru said lack of access to waste is a major problem.

We used to pick stuff from a place where this company used to burn their waste. We would still find things.... Then they got fined ... so now they don’t burn it – they call a truck and it all gets taken away.... What’s left for us? (Pune)



Photo from Bogotá: J. D. M. Mulford

Infrastructure plays a significant role in waste pickers’ livelihoods.

- In Bogotá, Durban, and Nakuru, both poor access to infrastructure and high cost of infrastructure services are a problem for 70% or more of waste pickers.
- 63% of waste pickers in the combined sample said the cost of public transport is a problem. 59% said inadequate workspace is a problem.

In Belo Horizonte, a supportive policy environment positively impacts waste pickers’ livelihoods.

- The Belo Horizonte municipality has a formal partnership with waste pickers’ organizations and supports waste pickers with access to waste, infrastructure, subsidies and worker education.
- Waste picker organizations there have a long history of engaging local government. In the focus groups, local government was identified as a helpful institution eight of nine times it was mentioned.
- 63% of waste pickers in Belo Horizonte said they have experienced support from the city, compared to 26% or less in the other four cities.
- However, waste pickers did report serious problems regarding deterioration of existing infrastructure for sorting / storage of recyclables and difficulties maintaining dialogue with local authorities.

Note on Sampling & Methodology

The IEMS uses qualitative and quantitative methods. Informal workers’ perceptions were captured in their own words through participatory focus groups held in each city / sector. A survey questionnaire was subsequently administered to the 75 focus group participants in each city / sector plus another 75 workers (with some slight variations in sample size). The sampling approach was designed

to maintain comparability across cities / sectors while allowing flexibility to meet local circumstances. Where possible, the MBO developed a stratified random sample that was statistically representative of the MBO population. Where not possible, the city team used a quota sampling approach. Local researchers worked with the MBO to identify the best possible sample based on circumstances.

- Waste pickers in Belo Horizonte envision ways of improving their working conditions and making themselves more efficient service providers.

We want a different discussion: adequate warehouses, adequate technologies, adequate equipment, so that we can increase the potential of the people's productivity and, at the same time, humanize the work, which is degrading inside the warehouses. (Belo Horizonte)

An exclusionary policy environment in other cities affects livelihoods negatively.

- In Bogotá and Durban, over 84% of waste pickers said poor treatment by the local authority is a problem in their work. More than 89% in those cities said regulations and by-laws regarding waste are a problem, and about 80% said harassment is a problem.

They burn the waste and don't let us work where we've always worked. (Bogotá)

Police bring their dogs when we are getting the goods from the cars, and they chase us away with the dogs. (Durban)

They have generated Constitutional Court cases that say our rights as recyclers are protected, but this country goes on favouring multimillionaires. (Bogotá)

Social exclusion compounds waste pickers' difficulties.

- 97% of waste pickers in Bogotá and Durban said social exclusion was a problem in their work. 76% in Nakuru experienced social exclusion.

You are called a thief. We are always being discouraged. People do not think our work is anything. (Nakuru)

It disturbs us to be undermined by other people when we are doing our job. It makes it difficult for us to carry on with our job. (Durban)



Photo from Durban

Waste pickers' organizations help counteract social and legal exclusion.

We have the backing of the organization, so citizens respect us. (Pune)

[The organization] is 100% important, because it has brought us together, it is the head, it is the core. (Bogotá)

Value Chain Dynamics

Within value chains, waste pickers are in a disadvantaged position with limited leverage over selling prices.

- Focus groups in every city ranked unstable prices among the three most significant driving forces: including 10 of 15 groups each in Belo Horizonte, Bogotá and Nakuru.
- Focus groups in every city except Bogotá ranked exploitative or dependent relations with buyers among the most significant drivers.
- 87% reported unstable prices are a major or moderate problem. 61% reported difficulty negotiating better prices from buyers.

Some exploit waste pickers because they do not pay the right price. (Bogotá)

Macroeconomic Environment

Price inflation combined with low and unstable selling prices for recyclables reduce earnings.

- Focus groups in Pune named rising prices — for electricity, food, hospital costs, and school fees and supplies — as a significant negative driver.
- Their main responses were to eat less and consume less in general.

This price rise is terrible. The prices of everything that we buy increase, and the price of recyclables comes down! (Pune)



Photo from Nakuru: P. Mburu

Implications for Households and Communities

Waste picking provides a crucial source of income for households.

- For 65% of waste pickers in the sample, earnings from their work as waste pickers were the main source of household income; another 15% of waste pickers' households relied on earnings from the informal work of others.
- Just 8% live in households whose main source of household income is formal wage employment.
- Only about one quarter of waste pickers had any other source of income.
- Yet waste pickers provide important services to city residents by collecting waste from their homes.

We offer a doorstep collection service for citizens and we ensure recyclables get recycled. (Pune)

Most waste pickers cannot rely on social protection or government grants.

- 33% have access to health insurance, mostly in Pune.
- Only 5% live in households with access to a pension.
- 13% live in households with access to government grants.

Policy Recommendations for More Inclusive Cities

Informal waste pickers perform valuable roles in municipal solid waste management systems, serving the economy, the environment and public wellbeing. City officials and urban planners must recognize the value of these workers.

Formal Integration of Waste Pickers into Solid Waste Management Systems

Local governments should formally integrate waste pickers into solid waste management by granting access to recyclable materials, formalizing partnerships and issuing contracts to MBOs, and providing infrastructure for sorting and other activities. They should also catalyze inclusive processes by opening channels of dialogue with waste pickers, establishing multi-stakeholder platforms for participatory planning, and giving incentives to cooperatives/associations and micro enterprises to enable them to enter new niches.



Photo from Pune: J. Luckham

Providing training to waste pickers' organizations to help them meet requirements for accountability and service delivery may be a necessary component of formal integration. Likewise, municipal officials may require training to interact with waste pickers as legitimate partners.

Urban and Workplace Infrastructure to Support Safe and Healthy Workplaces

The data show that poor access to, and high cost of, urban infrastructure is a significant problem for waste pickers. Governments should recognize the role that urban infrastructure plays in supporting livelihoods at the base of the economic pyramid, not just at the top.

Local governments should explore the possibilities for providing sheltered spaces to waste pickers for sorting, storage, processing, and equipment. Workspaces for waste pickers require adequate ventilation and occupational health safeguards to prevent injuries.

Representation in Planning Processes

Governments should institute inclusive processes for integrating waste pickers and their organizations into participatory planning of solid waste management.

The capacity of waste pickers and their organizations to bargain with government and in value chains should be strengthened.



Inclusive Cities: The Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organizing, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes.

To read the full IEMS city, sector and global reports, visit inclusivecities.org/iems.