



# Waste Pickers

## The Right to Be Recognized as Workers

Long before the green economy concept was globally adopted, waste pickers and other recycling and waste workers in the informal economy have offered a public service with positive economic, social and environmental impact for their communities. For centuries they have been fighting to have their activities recognized as an occupation and to improve their working conditions, their status and their earnings. Yet today, most waste pickers are not recognized as public service providers or “green workers” and have no clear links to formal industries or municipalities. Now, new industries and big corporations—both local and multinational—are competing for the same recyclable materials that waste pickers have traditionally relied on for their occupations and to earn their livelihoods.

**It is time for a new sustainable development paradigm to acknowledge, support and promote decent work for waste pickers.**

### A Huge Workforce Living at the Bottom of the Recycling Chain

Millions of people worldwide make a living from searching, collecting and processing materials that someone else has thrown away. Waste pickers, the general term adopted by the 1<sup>st</sup> World Conference of Waste Pickers in 2008, can range from people working on dumps or rummaging through garbage on the streets, to informal private collectors of recyclables who sell to middlemen or businesses or transform waste into new products. Some of them are organized pickers/sorters linked to unions, cooperatives or associations. Recycling is labour-intensive, providing millions of jobs. In fact, an estimated 24 million people worldwide are engaged in recycling: collecting, recovering, sorting, grading, cleaning, baling, or compacting waste, as well as processing waste into new products. The vast majority of these jobs—about 80 per cent—are in the informal economy.<sup>1</sup>

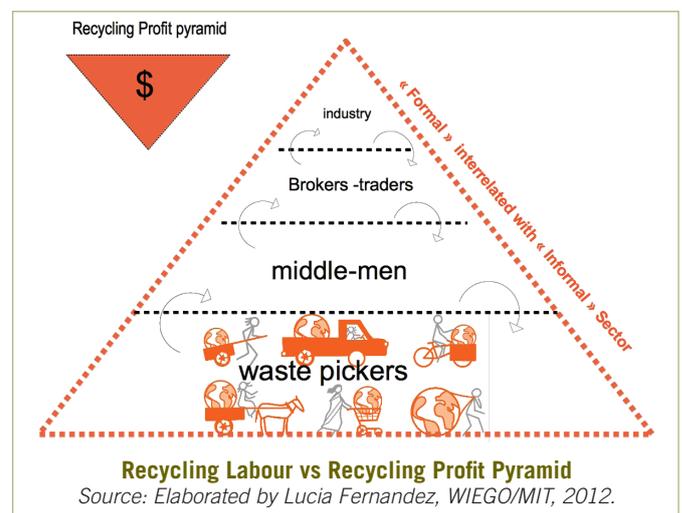
*“Labour and then some more labour, that’s what this business is all about, unpaid labour!”*

~Siraj Seth, Scrap merchant in Pune, India

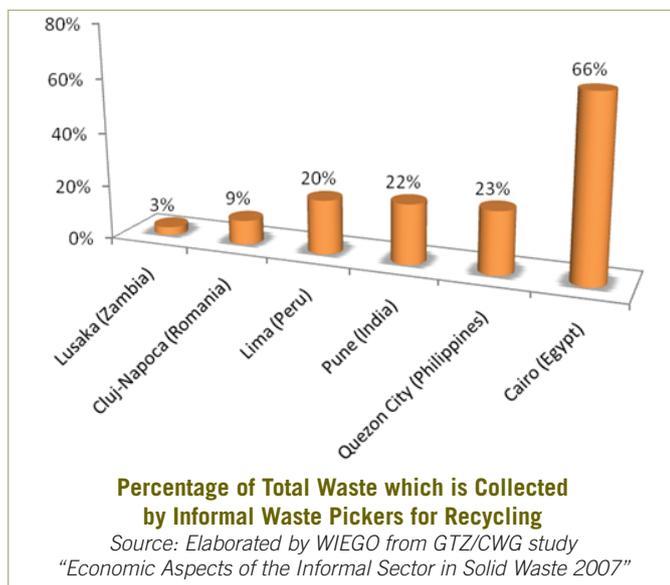
Despite their daily efforts to improve their situation, 15 million waste pickers live at the bottom of the economic pyramid, struggling alongside their families just to survive. Although their efforts deliver almost all recyclable materials to the recycling chain, they remain the most vulnerable actors within a highly profitable industry, where the price of raw materials generates millions in profits for those at the top of the pyramid. Is it possible for an environmentally sustainable economy to provide opportunities to waste pickers for decent work and to improve their social protection?

### Making an Essential Contribution to our Health, Our Cities and the Environment

In many cities in developing countries, waste pickers supply the *only* form of waste collection. A 2010 UN Habitat publication says waste pickers perform between 50-100 per cent of all ongoing waste collection in most cities in developing countries—a service for which they are not paid. Their work improves sanitation, thus it has public health and aesthetic benefits. Diverting recyclables that otherwise end up in dumps or landfills saves almost 30 per cent of space disposal. Together with the reduction of collection and transportation fleets, waste pickers thus save municipalities considerable costs. Yet in most places, municipalities, residents and local businesses pay nothing for these services. Worse, some private companies that hold contracts for collection and burial claim to have done so with waste that informal recyclers have diverted, thus negating the savings realized through the informal recycling sector and undermining waste pickers’ contributions.



Recycling is a labour-intensive model of waste management providing millions of jobs, and it is one of the cheapest and fastest ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Consider this: reducing one ton of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions through recycling costs 30 per cent less than doing so through energy efficiency and 90 per cent less than through wind power.<sup>2</sup> Recycling reduces emissions 25 times more than incineration does<sup>3</sup> and incinerators emit more CO<sub>2</sub> per unit of electricity than do coal-fired power plants.<sup>4</sup>



Recycling also reduces emissions in the forestry, mining and manufacturing sectors because much less energy is required to manufacture goods from recycled materials than from virgin materials. In the case of paper and wood products, there is another advantage: recycling paper products means less demand for wood and less deforestation.

## Contributing So Much Yet Struggling to Survive

*Waste pickers without access to waste are like farmers without land or fisherman without fish—we just can't survive! ~Silvio Ruiz Grisales, Waste picker Union Organizer, Bogota, Colombia*

Waste pickers worldwide lack a dignified and decent work. Despite their multifaceted contributions, they usually earn very little and have no social protection, while facing great risks. At any point where waste is handled, they are exposed to contaminated and toxic materials. There is great risk of injury, especially at open dumps where they can be run over by trucks or become the victims of surface subsidence, slides and fires. Waste pickers also endure ergonomic hazards such as heavy lifting, pushing of laden carts, static postures and repetition. These workers are also subject to social stigma and they are frequently harassed by authorities.

These are the most obvious hardships they face, but what remains hidden can cause even greater difficulties for their livelihoods.

### Waste pickers are vulnerable to dramatic price fluctuations, exploitation by middlemen, and artificially low prices.

The recent global recession only exacerbated this. While reducing the amount of waste generated is an important global goal, the current pricing structure means this could leave millions of informal workers without enough income to even cover their minimum basic requirements for survival. A more fair position in the value chain that legitimizes their occupation including ownership of productive initiatives to allow for more equitable distribution of profits is a key demand of waste pickers worldwide.

**Municipal solid waste management in the hands of waste multinational enterprises** jeopardizes the informal recycling workers globally. Increasingly municipalities are outsourcing waste collection and transportation to private companies, whether local or multinational, threatening the livelihoods of both waste pickers and municipal workers who have traditionally collected, sorted and added value to waste.

**Global sectoral trends in green disguises, such as funding for incinerators and waste-to-energy plants** that burn all waste indiscriminately, including recyclable materials, also threaten the work of waste pickers. Municipalities, sold on these technologies by big business, misunderstand them as "green technologies" but in fact these undermine the real green technology—inclusive recycling with social recognition.

**Waste pickers usually belong to socially excluded and economically marginalized populations**—e.g. Dalits and minorities in India, blacks in South Africa, Vietnamese refugees in Cambodia, displaced rural people in Colombia, and Zabbaleen/Coptic Christians in Egypt. Waste picking is an occupation that offers easy entry, flexibility of hours and worker autonomy. Although vulnerable, the waste pickers have agency and often choose to work in this sector, which can offer better returns on labour than their other options. Formalization and/or privatization should not displace or exclude the already marginalized waste pickers for whom the informal recycling sector has provided space.



Uruli landfill, Pune. Photo: J.Luckham

## Improving Working Conditions through Organization

In the face of these challenges, waste pickers are organizing, trying to negotiate with their municipalities, and testing developing inclusive waste management models, where waste pickers are officially recognized and become part of the system of collection and recycling. Models with success indicators now exist in several developing countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and India. In some places, there is strong promotion for waste pickers to be integrated into the existing system to perform segregation of recyclables, while formal municipal workers remain in charge of waste disposal and collection. Where recycling is formalized as part of the municipal public service, waste pickers have the opportunity to be appropriately integrated and recognized as workers.

**Large-scale and Decentralized Waste Picker Cooperatives** formed by trade unions, national movements and associations have made strides:

- In Buenos Aires, Argentina the Excluded Workers Movement has about 2,000 members. Waste pickers who are part of the *El Amanecer de los Cartoneros* in Argentina have collected and recycled 225 tons of discarded material, gaining recognition and economic compensation from their municipal government.
- SWaCH in Pune, India is a cooperative born out of the successful struggles of KKKPKP, a trade union of waste pickers. Through a contract with the Pune Municipal Corporation, more than 2,300 SWaCH members provide door-to-door waste collection to over 400,000 homes in the city. They are paid through resident user fees, and are accountable to the residents they serve as well as the municipality, which pays administrative expenses and provides equipment. The workers segregate collected waste into dry recyclables and wet waste for a composting operation that creates valuable natural fertilizer used in public spaces.
- The estimated 600 hundred cooperative members of the National Waste Pickers Movement, MNCR in Brazil, are providing jobs to more than 80,000 *catadores* and are responsible for collecting 90 per cent of all material recycled in Brazil.
- In 2013, the Mayor's Office in Bogota, Colombia launched a remuneration system for waste pickers in exchange for their services collecting, transporting and harvesting recyclable materials. This recognition as public service providers came after many years of struggle for the 23 cooperative members of the waste pickers' association in Bogota, which cover more than 2,300 members. Initially, 790 waste picker households saw their normal earnings double (perhaps eventually triple); 4,000 more (of Colombia's 18,000 waste pickers) are registered for payment. The legal victories in Bogota have spread to independent, unorganized waste pickers in Colombia as well, setting a precedent for an inclusive formalization system for all waste pickers under public cleaning services. The system still requires development and consolidation.

**Creating More Jobs is possible** through recycling and zero waste strategies:

- A recent study <sup>5</sup> shows that 1.5 million new jobs stand to be created in the United States by diverting waste away from landfills and incinerators toward reuse, recycling, and composting initiatives. The European Commission estimates that 400,000 jobs would be created in Europe just by implementing the current policies on recycling.



*Cartoneando, Excluded Workers Movement, Argentina.*  
Photo: MTE



*SWaCH collection, Pune.*  
Photo: L. Vryenhoek



*Coopersoli waste picker, Belo Horizonte.*  
Photo: L. Tuttle



*Alqueria recycling centre, Bogota.*  
Photo: L. Tuttle

# Unlocking the Waste Pickers' Potential<sup>6</sup> to Achieve Decent Work

- The efforts of waste pickers to gain recognition and legitimization as workers, as well as their expansion and formalization, should be supported, without undermining their existing and long-term contributions.
- Strengthening waste pickers' organizations so that they can collectively improve the factors that lead to economic and social dignity, and can form a voice to represent them in local, national and international policy, regulatory and collective bargaining forums, is crucial. This will result in better working conditions and earnings for waste pickers, as well as more resource recovery and a more sustainable environment.
- Repressive policies, laws and regulations should be replaced with supportive and inclusive policies and laws that enable formal and informal systems of waste management and recycling.
- Governments should recognize the existence of the occupation and the important environmental, social, technical and economic role played by waste pickers. Governments should also invest in resource recovery/protection programs and laws/policies that ensure stability in the occupation and decent livelihoods for waste pickers at the bottom of the recycling chain. They should promote policies that improve workers' conditions in the recycling industry—and not adopt technologies that displace large numbers of workers.
- Most importantly, local governments should adopt a holistic approach to solid waste management that recognizes the economic and environmental benefits of including informal waste pickers in waste management and planning.
- Finally, the ILO should recognize waste pickers as self-employed workers who provide a public service that, by its nature, generates high impact environmental benefits. Mechanisms should be enabled to ensure waste pickers earn a living income with improved situations, and that social protection is in place so they can remain in the occupation and enjoy decent and safe working conditions.



Waste pickers unite and rally at COP 17 in Durban. Photo: D.Tsoutouras

<sup>1</sup> ILO. 2013. "Sustainable development, decent work and green jobs." International Labour Conference, 102nd Session, 2013, Report V.

<sup>2</sup> Skumatz, L. 2008. "Recycling and Climate Change." *Resource Recycling*, October, pp 14-20.

<sup>3</sup> Tellus Institute. 2008. "Assessment of Materials Management Options for the Massachusetts Solid Waste Master Plan Review." December, p 2.

<sup>4</sup> USEPA's Emissions & Generation Resource Integrated Database, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Tellus Institute with Sound Resource Management, 2012, prepared for Blue Green Alliance, Teamster, SEIU, NRDC, Recycling Works and GAIA.

<sup>6</sup> GAIA, 2013, *Recycling Jobs: Unlocking the Potential for Green Employment Growth*.

## Sources and Resources:

- <http://wiego.org>
- [www.globalrec.org](http://www.globalrec.org)
- Global Alliance of Waste pickers, Climate Change Statement 2010.
- <http://www.chintan-india.org/>
- <http://zerowasteworld.org/uncategorized/tribute-to-recycling-workers/>
- <http://no-burn.org/more-jobs-less-pollution>
- <http://www.recyclingworkscampaign.org/>

This Position Paper was prepared by WIEGO, with contributions from the waste picker trade union Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) in India and the Asociación Nacional de Recicladores de Colombia (ANR) in Colombia, for the 102nd session of the International Labour Conference, June 2013.

**About WIEGO:** Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO builds alliances with, and draws its membership from, three constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy, and professionals from development agencies interested in the informal economy. WIEGO pursues its objectives by helping to build and strengthen networks of informal worker organizations; undertaking policy analysis, statistical research and data analysis on the informal economy; providing policy advice and convening policy dialogues on the informal economy; and documenting and disseminating good practice in support of the informal workforce. For more information visit: [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).