

Waste Pickers Take the Global Stage

***Impact:** The arrival of a strong, prepared and articulate movement of waste pickers to the UN climate change talks shifted perceptions. Prior to these events, waste pickers were invisible, both in relation to their role in urban environmental management, and in the negative impacts they experience from the extension of waste-to-energy projects. Waste pickers gained new levels of influence and visibility with support from Inclusive Cities and a growing alliance of organizations supporting their struggle.*

The millions of people worldwide who earn a living through waste picking contribute to the conservation of natural resources and energy while reducing air and water pollution. They also help to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions through the reuse of materials. However, they are fighting for their livelihoods in the face of privatization of waste management regimes and “waste-to-energy” schemes that favour corporate incinerators that literally burn up potential earnings for these informal workers.

Waste pickers have been organizing around the globe to present a strong front as they strive for recognition of their significant environmental contribution. Through its collaboration with the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers and Allies, WIEGO has been providing technical, logistical and communications support to waste pickers from Latin America, Asia and Africa. This support has helped a previously unrecognized workforce to step out of the shadows and make itself heard on the world stage. Through waste pickers’ attendance and action at a series of high-profile international events, waste pickers have garnered the attention and respect of decision makers.

Bonn Climate Change Talks, June 2009

In the lead up to the UN Climate Change negotiations, an alliance developed between the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) and WIEGO to support waste pickers in making their voice heard in these negotiations. The preparatory meeting of negotiating parties in Bonn represented a first opportunity to engage waste pickers in a process that would have important implications for their livelihoods.

A waste pickers’ statement, prepared for this meeting and produced through the Inclusive Cities project, laid



photo: D. Tsoutouras

out the facts: recycling reduces emissions by 25 per cent more than incineration, lessens the need for deforestation and other resource usage, and produces 10 times more jobs. It depicted waste pickers as “unseen environmental entrepreneurs” and called upon the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and national governments to recognize their role and create policies and mitigation strategies that look at the true environmental and social costs of current strategies.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen - COP15, December 2009

At COP 15, waste pickers shared their experiences and advocated for alternative funding mechanisms to support fair and just solutions to climate change. They met with key climate change negotiators, including Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) authorities, to voice their core demands:

1. Recognize the crucial role the informal recycling sector plays in climate change mitigation and a healthy economy.
2. Approve a Global Climate Fund to invest in resource recovery programmes that will ensure decent livelihoods for all workers, and that are directly accessible by waste pickers and other informal economy groups.
3. Exclude waste disposal technologies (such as incinerators) from the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) and other climate funds, as these destroy valuable, reclaimable materials and take income from workers.

While the tangible outcomes for waste pickers following COP 15 were few, extensive media coverage –including features in such heavyweights as the *Washington Post* and *The Hindu* –reached a global audience and set the stage for future gains.



Tianjin Climate Change Conference, September/October 2010

A delegation of three women leaders from the Indian Alliance (AIW) and one activist from KKP (a waste picker trade union in Pune, India) spoke, including at the inauguration plenary. This marked a first for informal recyclers at international meetings. To have civil society representatives from the informal economy make presentations at this level was a remarkable, breakthrough event.

The United Nations Climate Change Conference in Cancun, COP 16, December 2010

At COP 16, the delegation of waste pickers garnered media attention through a press conference and participated in two Klimaforum events. WIEGO coordinated and funded, along with GAIA, the participation of 10 waste pickers and provided support for logistics and communications as well as broad global coordination for programme, presentations, press materials, conferences, and side events. The event gave waste pickers a chance to reiterate their demands, and they garnered tremendous media attention internationally.

During COP 16, it came to light that 15 waste pickers (*pepenadores*) in Northern Mexico were being detained for protesting the closure of a dump and the potential privatization of the solid waste management system there. The waste picker group in Cancun quickly planned a protest to show their solidarity with the *pepenadores* and to highlight waste pickers' rights. This protest received considerable media attention in Mexico and in the international press, increasing pressure on authorities to deal fairly with the issue. Delegates also met with the Mexican government in support of these arrested workers. The *pepenadores* were eventually released from prison.

A More Enlightened CDM

The Clean Development Mechanism Projects affecting waste picker livelihoods came under revision in 2010-

2011, and the WIEGO-GAIA partnership was involved in facilitating waste picker input into these processes. Waste picker organizations were invited to review and comment on the revised CDM methodology before its finalization. The approved CDM methodology makes explicit mention of the informal recycling sector – a victory in having waste pickers internationally recognized for their contribution to reducing climate change.

Broadcasting Success

Through the Inclusive Cities project, the successes and achievements of waste picker movements, like the increasing visibility gained through participation in the climate negotiations, are shared more broadly. In addition to supporting the organization and networking of waste pickers at national, regional and global levels, and documenting better or promising practices in inclusive solid waste management, WIEGO ensures waste picker activities and stories are highlighted on the Inclusive Cities website (inclusivocities.org) and through a blog on Waste Pickers and Climate Change (<http://frontlineagainstclimatechange.inclusivocities.org>).

WIEGO's Sector Specialist tracks news about waste pickers worldwide in English, Spanish, and Portuguese and posts updates online so waste picker organizations and their allies can follow what's happening and react to events, raising awareness and supporting collective action. Alerts are sent via Twitter. WIEGO also provides translation support to a global listserve and coordination support for the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers and Allies as well as facilitating waste picker participation in policy events and debates that affect their livelihoods.

Efforts for the Future

Waste pickers have made great strides gaining voice, visibility and validity in recent years – progress that is the result of strong organizations and alliances. However, privatization of waste management and “waste-to-energy” schemes continue to pose a threat. For the men, women, and children who make their living collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling what others throw away, these are vital livelihood issues. Because this group of workers contributes to public health and the health of the world's environment, these are also vital issues for all of us. Much work remains to be done to raise worldwide awareness and to secure recognition at all levels of the valuable work done by waste pickers.

WIEGO and the Inclusive Cities alliance will continue working alongside waste pickers to help strengthen their organizations, and to prepare for COP 17 in Durban, South Africa in November-December 2011.

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Inclusive Cities project: Inclusive Cities focuses on support and capacity building for membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the urban informal economy. Through organizing, advocacy, and policy analysis, informal workers are making their needs heard within urban planning processes. Partners in the Inclusive Cities project include MBOs of the working poor and technical support organizations committed to improving the situation of the working poor. For more information, and to access research and publications on inclusive urban planning and capacity building tools for MBOs, visit: www.InclusiveCities.org