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World Circular Economy Forum 2025:

A Call to Centre Inclusivity and Perspectives from the Global South

As we prepare to participate in the first [World Circular Economy Forum \(WCEF\)](#) hosted in Latin America, we urge participants to recognize the essential contributions of [40 million](#) informal recycling workers. This year marks the ninth WCEF – the world’s leading space for business leaders, policymakers and experts from around the world to share circular economy solutions. We also call for circularity to be looked at through the lens of the Global South and just transitions, including through a session focused on empowering workers in informal employment as a pathway to inclusive circularity.

[Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund](#), summarizes the idea of the circular economy as “an economic model that aims to optimize the system as a whole and tackle the root causes of biodiversity loss, climate change and the depletion of natural resources”. It is a critical resource-efficiency strategy that fosters innovation and competitiveness, increasing the security of sufficient supplies while reducing the need for virgin materials and their associated negative externalities. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recognizes the circular economy as an increasingly important mitigation approach that can help deliver human well-being by minimizing the waste of energy and resources. It also empowers new social actors in mitigation actions and creates jobs through increased sharing, reuse, refurbishment and recycling activities.

As the [United Nations Environment Programme \(UNEP\) circularity platform](#) states, transitions to a circular economy must be inclusive – shifting from a “winners vs. losers” dynamic to a “win-win” scenario that advances both environmental goals and social equity. The intersection of circularity, climate mitigation and inclusivity should be central to these conversations.

Integrate perspectives from the Global South in circular economy initiatives

The debate on the circular economy has gained traction in both the Global North and Global South in the last few decades. With this year’s WCEF theme set to explore the potential of tropical solutions, it is time to properly integrate local and contextual knowledge from the Global South, which to date has been neglected or sidelined in discussions on circular transitions.

In fact, the [Circularity Gap Report](#) 2023 highlights how massive rises in global material extraction and use are not translating into improved living standards, especially in the Global South. At the same time, informal systems of reuse and repair in the Global South, which embody circular principles, have yet to be meaningfully acknowledged by circular economy systems. This is demonstrated by the fact that most of the studies reviewed in

[Decent Work in the Circular Economy 2023](#) were focused on understanding circularity in the Global North. To address this disconnect, circular economy models must uplift these [everyday practices of circularity and learn from these different perspectives](#), or risk undermining the livelihoods of millions of workers worldwide.

Acknowledge the critical role played by workers in informal employment in the circular economy

Workers in informal employment – who make up close to 60% of the world’s workers¹ – are intimately connected to the circular economy. Their role must be acknowledged and integrated into circular economy initiatives. Waste pickers around the world help reduce waste pollution, collecting waste at no cost to municipalities and industries. Recent studies show they contribute to the mitigation of greenhouse gases across the recycling chain.² They reclaim materials and products that can be recirculated (retaining their embodied energy) and support natural processes that enable nature to thrive through the collection of organic fractions that can be composted. As acknowledged by the [International Alliance of Waste Pickers](#), they are key circular economy agents leading a thriving industry of reuse, repair, refurbishment, repurposing and recycling in several countries of the Global South.

What can governments, academics and the private sector do?

Strengthening organizations of workers in informal employment is one of the pathways to integrate inclusivity into circular economy systems in an empowered way, while contributing to climate action. Another is designing and implementing inclusive extended producer responsibility (EPR) systems with fair remuneration for waste pickers and extension of social protections. Promoting workers’ access to climate finance could help them mitigate the impacts of climate change in their workplaces through implementing climate-sensitive work infrastructure. Waste pickers must be officially acknowledged for their contributions to reducing greenhouse gases. Governments should integrate the modelling of waste pickers’ contributions to achieve their national, regional and locally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement, incorporate waste pickers into these plans, and monitor progress.

¹ ILO. 2023. [Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical update](#). Geneva: ILO.

² Vergara, S E, A Damgaard and D Gomez (2016), “[The efficiency of informality: quantifying greenhouse gas reductions from informal recycling in Bogotá, Colombia](#)”, *Journal of Industrial Ecology* Vol 20, No 1, pages 107–119.

Reimagine the circular economy as a tool for improving well-being, addressing inequality and creating a just transition

Governments, academics and the private sector must integrate a livelihood dimension to circular economy concepts and solutions. Workers in informal employment and their livelihoods must be protected in policies and strategies that promote a more circular and green economy. Brazil's [National Circular Economy Strategy](#) exemplifies an approach that focuses on eliminating waste and pollution, keeping materials and products in use at their highest value, and regenerating nature while also acknowledging the importance of involving both formal and informal workers in the circular economy.

What can governments, academics and the private sector do?

Building green skills for and with workers in informal employment and creating inclusive systems will be key to placing informal livelihoods at the centre of the discourse and practice of circularities. To do this will require fundamentally rebalancing our priorities: from circular economy solutions as a technological fix to the circular economy as a tool for addressing inequality, promoting well-being and a just transition. This reorientation is critical, as the implementation of circular economy initiatives often fails to address existing inequalities, leading to the further marginalization and displacement of workers in both the Global South and the Global North. Research, policy and discourse must prioritize social sustainability and recognize the existing circular practices in the Global South – practices that are often pro-poor, context-specific and comprehensive. Businesses have a role to play by raising the visibility of the contribution workers in the informal economy already make to circular economies, by making inclusivity a core dimension of circularity protocols and by harmonizing human rights frameworks. Furthermore, workers should have a seat at climate governance forums as they happen, for instance, in [Brazil's Climate Change Forum](#) circular economy thematic chamber.

We invite organizations within the circular economy ecosystem to become co-owners of these ambitions for an inclusive, people-centred circular economy with a commitment towards:

- **Recognition, acknowledgement, legal protection and integration of waste pickers into the legally binding Global Plastics Treaty:** With their significant contribution to plastic pollution mitigation and also as critical roleplayers in greenhouse gases mitigation, waste pickers have been formally acknowledged as key actors in the context of the negotiations on the legally binding Plastics Treaty. A [Plastics Treaty](#) that embodies sustainable livelihoods is crucial and this can be done by crafting a system in which actors in situations of vulnerability are able to make a sustainable living. Emphasis on waste prevention, reuse and repair, and safety in the value chain are essential to support decent work conditions in the plastics chain while contributing to circularity. Furthermore, the emphasis on the design of plastic products – ensuring they do not become waste or pollution – must support decent working conditions across the value chain, while also contributing to progress toward a circular economy for plastics. To achieve this, it is crucial to adopt design criteria such as design for reduction and optimization, design for prolonged use and reuse, design for repair and refurbishment, and design for recyclability.

It makes sense to build plastics systems that build from the creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, adaptability and expertise of waste pickers. A global treaty cannot leave anyone behind, as [stated by the International Alliance of Waste Pickers](#). As the negotiations continue, it is important to support the voices and the visibility of waste pickers at the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee meetings.

- **Building the resilience of MSMEs and waste pickers as climate frontliner:** Waste pickers suffer the [impacts of climate change](#). Floods, fires, heat, droughts and infectious diseases affect their lives directly, impacting both their conditions of work and their health. Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often play an important role bridging workers in informal employment and formal circular systems. Yet, they and the livelihoods they provide are most at risk when new circular economy policies are put in place. The improvement of waste working conditions for workers in informal employment and investment in climate-sensitive sorting spaces could increase their role in moving secondary resources upstream, helping to free up land and preserve urban environments. This would further facilitate their role as circular economy agents and their contribution to climate mitigation.

Businesses have a role to play in raising the visibility of the contribution workers in informal employment make to circular economies and climate mitigation. Businesses should also make inclusivity a core dimension of [circularity protocols](#).

- **Institutionalized participatory forums:** All levels of government and the private sector should commit to ongoing, institutionalized dialogue with waste pickers to plan for climate adaptation and circular systems.