

No Longer at the Margins:

Unlocking Potential of Informal Waste Pickers for Inclusive and Climate Just Solutions to Solid Waste Management

Varalakshmi Vemuru, Harjot Kaur and Geetika Hora¹

In the world of informal waste pickers, there are two coexisting and somewhat conflicting realities of formal recognition as green agents in some countries and a continued discrimination and precarious existence in others. As very few people have access to formal waste collection, these informal waste collectors support climate change mitigation by helping to collect waste and unclog landfills. Some countries have modified and adapted their legal and policy environments to formally recognize the work of informal waste pickers as being integral to solid waste management systems. Waste pickers have organized themselves into collectives, cooperations and networks to help their members in accessing crucial services, but more importantly, are also constantly negotiating for a seat at the table in solid waste management policy fora. In contrast, millions of informal waste pickers continue to roam streets in search of waste and throng landfills to extract recyclable waste in extremely hazardous conditions, wear no protective gear and often face strong restrictions and punitive actions. Women and children are engaged in overwhelmingly large numbers in waste picking and are exposed to exploitation and violence. There have been several policy reforms in the recent years, but the bigger question is how to translate policy shifts into actual improvements in the work conditions and well-being of informal waste pickers? In this topic that is so clearly caught between elements of continuity and change, we aim to spark a dialogue around some of the potential priorities for development agencies to consider as they put their financing and negotiating capacities into increasing number of solid waste management programs across the world.

The Solid Waste Management Challenge: Promoting inclusion alongside shifts towards formalization and mechanization.

Those who contribute the least to generating waste are most at risk from its adverse effects. According to the World Bank, the world generated 2.24 billion tons of solid waste and projected to increase to 3.88 billion by 2050. The high-income countries account for a staggering 32 percent waste generated while they account for only 8 percent of the world's population. However, a welcome shift is that Solid Waste



¹ Varalakshmi Vemuru is the Practice Manager for Social Sustainability and Inclusion (SSI) Global Practice of Europe and Central Asia Region of the World Bank. Harjot Kaur is the Senior Social Development Specialist & SSI CMU Coordinator for Central Asia, Europe and Central Asia Region of the World Bank. Geetika Hora is a Senior Social Inclusion and Gender Consultant with the World Bank.

Management (SWM) has been finally recognised as one of the significant solutions in the global climate action tool kit - expanding its significance from just a decarbonising pathway to an effective lever of a 'just green transition'. It has also emerged as a critical source of livelihood for some of the poorest, most disenfranchised, and at climate-risk demographics. It is estimated that almost 20 million people across the world are engaged in informal waste picking and recycling. This engagement is mostly informal in nature, and involves work in extremely hazardous conditions, devoid of adherence to safety protocols and regulations. Countries across the globe are looking to transition their SWM systems embedding more efficient, resilient, and sustainable practices. While this is good news, the global discourse must commit itself equally to focusing on the associated human capital, especially the informal waste pickers who face acute stigma and remain on the social, economic and spatial margins. They need to be harnessed into a more skilled and empowered workforce, requiring shifts towards a more formalised, regulated and just work environment, especially for women who are at increased risk of gender-based violence both in their families and at their workplace.

What has shifted the needle on informal waste pickers' inclusion? Three areas of dynamic change

There is no dearth of innovative programs, progressive legislations, and waste picker-led movements in different parts of the world. Most of these 'wins' have been hard fought ones, in contexts that were unsupportive of the roles of informal waste pickers. In this section, we mention three broad areas where there has been dynamic change.

Legal recognition of informal waste pickers through policy and legal reform.

There are countries which have changed or adapted existing laws to officially recognize the work & roles of waste pickers in waste management. For instance, in a landmark ruling in 2011 in the Constitutional Court of Colombia, the rights of informal recyclers were formally recognized requiring the State to adopt measures for recyclers' rights to health, education and food and other social services. It also pushed for policy change to include recyclers in Solid Waste Disposal Programs of collection, classification, and marketing of inorganic or recyclable waste. In South Africa, the government has changed its policy and developed new national guidelines for waste pickers integration in SWM systems. These guidelines provide for formal contract between the cooperative and industry/municipality and waste picker organizations by supporting them to bid for tenders; provision of space for sorting, storage, baling and possibly processing; and a comprehensive capacity building & mentorship program specifically designed to support waste picker cooperatives.

The power of organizing and collective strength. The compelling models of waste pickers coming together as cooperatives and enterprises across countries, in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, India, and South Africa provide future pathways towards improved dignity, livelihoods and living conditions for many informal waste pickers and their families. From promoting access to social safety nets, health services and education to offering cost effective solutions to municipalities

for waste collection, sorting and recycling; the waste picker organizations have many achievements to show.

We found of great relevance, a unique model of Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative (REDI) in North Macedonia, which seeks to integrate estimated 5,000 informal waste collectors, largely from the Roma community, through a sustainable social enterprise approach. It established the “Waste Management and Collection Company - REDI Recycling” in 2020 and has since then pioneered primary waste collection systems in residential buildings and incorporated eco-friendly solutions such as electric tricycles for waste collection. It has established its footprint by securing collaborations with multiple municipalities in the capital, Skopje, aligning itself with waste management laws and impacting 60,000 individuals of the city. In Pune city in India, the municipality signed a contract with a waste picker organization to become service providers for the door-to-door collection of waste. In 2023, around 4,300 SWaCH volunteers collected garbage from about 80 per cent of the households, collecting almost 600 tons of MSW per day. This saved the municipality over INR 150 million per annum in waste handling costs alone apart from the dignity and better working conditions to the waste pickers.

Waste Picker Organizations in Brazil won a large, prestigious contract in 2014 and put the potential of waste pickers in global limelight.

The Movement of Brazilian Waste Pickers (MNCR) saw positive results of its efforts to integrate waste pickers in recycling services of the country when close to 840 waste pickers organized in cooperatives were contracted to manage waste from 12 football stadiums across the country during the Football World Cup in 2014.

Getting Waste Pickers their Due: Efforts for Regulated and Safe Work Conditions. Formal and dignified work arrangements for waste pickers include options to formalize their work, formulation of policy and legislative reforms towards more regulated work hours and wages, defining safety protocols, registering them for social benefits and entitlements, health insurance, prevention of child labor and policies to prevent Sexual Exploitation and Abuse. However, these demands have been met with varying success and promise. In Tanzania, the World Bank worked with other partners and the government to develop a sanitation worker guideline, which included waste pickers, to ensure adherence to labour laws and improved working conditions. Government of India’s National Child Labour Project (NCLP) seeks to withdraw and rehabilitate children engaged in hazardous work by linking them to education and healthcare.

How can the development agencies support & scale-up the ongoing work?

In their role as donors & partners with governments in supporting large scale interventions, especially in low-income countries, the development agencies need to demonstrate greater commitment to ensure dignity and recognition for informal waste pickers not just through influencing policy but also through

innovative projects with cutting-edge interventions. Below we explore some of these options which offer tremendous promise and potential.

Support the collection, collation, and dissemination of marginalized voices through social dialogue and impact assessments.

If programmes around SWM are not sufficiently tracking impacts on informal waste pickers in their interventions, it is important to ensure that social assessments prior to program design recognize and elaborate upon informal waste pickers as critical stakeholders. This needs to be further integrated into the monitoring and evaluation systems. Beyond project boundaries, supporting dedicated research and social inclusion studies can help bring out the range of challenges, but also the crucial potential of informal waste pickers in green and inclusive solutions to SWM and climate change. These can be used as advocacy and sensitization tools with governments. It is also useful to build on insights from select promising practices from across the world, but especially from the developing countries which are experiencing staggering population growth and urbanization.

Forge unique partnerships and collaborations between civil society, policymakers, and the private sector to discuss emerging trends and solutions towards inclusive SWM systems that integrate roles of informal waste pickers. The aim should be to spark new dimensions for delivering climate justice and social inclusion through the solid waste management sector.

- *Sensitizing and enhancing capacities of governments and public sector organizations.* Organizing trainings and promoting effective use of primary research and social assessments which highlight not just numbers, but also challenges faced by informal waste pickers and effective forms of engagement in SWM and might make for some powerful sensitization material.
- *Policy influencing for consensus building on role of waste pickers.* The practical challenges of dealing with and exploring models to integrate role of informal waste pickers into formal SWM systems leads many governments to resist exploring their engagement in more formal ways. Bringing to their attention some of the models that have been tried in other countries will encourage peer to peer learning and motivation.
- *Supporting small-scale waste picker organizations* that are looking to graduate into social enterprises and ‘green businesses’ will require comprehensive package of interventions including assuring flexible and reliable finance, technical capacity enhancement, incubation and mentoring support, while also looking at shifts in policies and legislations for such enterprises to operate effectively and go to scale.

Ensure financing for integrated as well as stand-alone interventions to support informal waste pickers.

Since 2000, the World Bank has committed over \$4.7 billion to more than 340 solid waste management programs in many countries. Financing has bene for developing state-of-the-art waste management systems; supporting major waste producing countries to reduce consumption of plastics and marine litter through comprehensive waste reduction and recycling

programs; and reducing food waste through consumer education, organics management, and coordinated food waste management programs. Each of these proposed solutions must address the impact on informal waste pickers and explore opportunities to strengthen their engagement for livelihood opportunities and well-being. Some of these are discussed below:

- *Skilling of informal waste pickers for enhanced livelihood opportunities and of private and public agencies to employ and retain them.* The importance of climate change and the jobs agenda for the World Bank presents a great opportunity to enhance labour market capacity of the SWM sector leading to 'triple wins': creating employment opportunities, contributing to environmental protection, and improving public health. These are welcome shifts and need to be backed with funding and taken to a wide range of stakeholders for dialogue and then subsequently translated into actual programs. Specific focus on women's economic empowerment can be explored, given the bold and ambitious vision of new World Bank Gender Strategy.
- *Interventions to improve work conditions.* World Bank's programs in Jamaica, South Africa and Tanzania offer insights and impacts of defining strong labor management procedures for ensuring regulated working conditions for sanitation workers and using these project-level opportunities to influence larger policy ecosystem towards safety and dignity of sanitation workers. Few projects on SWM are under preparation and immediate dialogue and effort to tap into existing good practices on inclusion of waste pickers can allow for timely inclusion of interventions, budgets and institutional mechanisms.

Getting citizens informed and involved. The stigma and exclusion from poorly informed citizens break the morale and trust of informal waste pickers. However, efforts such as in Latin America and India where campaigns, interactive platforms, inviting waste pickers to schools and colleges to talk on topics such as a green solution to waste management, inclusion in circular economy and climate change have acted as huge 'morale boosters' for waste pickers. Their demand for dignity above everything else needs to form the core of such efforts.

World Bank's Environment and Social Framework has evolved from earlier safeguard policies with focus on 'minimizing social risks' to enhancing social and gender outcomes of the projects. While the ESF already provides for identification of these workers as 'vulnerable groups' and encourages development of mitigation measures there is a strategic need for a 'social dialogue amongst all stakeholders (municipal organisations, communities, innovators, policy makers, social scientists) and application of social impact assessments to first plug the knowledge gap and mainstream the conversation about the 'collective social impact' on the target population through an inclusive design blueprint.

Through this paper, we hope to provoke interest and commitment towards evolving an inclusive and climate-just pathway for informal waste pickers. If the

recent efforts of waste picker organizations and networks are anything to go by, they are well-poised to make their voices heard and potential felt. Are we ready?

References

Kaza, Silpa, Lisa Yao, Perinaz Bhada-Tata, and Frank Van Woerden. 2018. What a Waste 2.0: A Global Snapshot of Solid Waste Management to 2050. Urban Development Series. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1329-0. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries and Department of Science and Innovation (2020). Waste picker integration guideline for South Africa: Building the Recycling Economy and Improving Livelihoods through Integration of the Informal Sector. DEFF and DST: Pretoria.

S4YE. 2024 Putting Waste to Work in a Circular Economy. Creating Good Jobs for Youth in the Waste Sector. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

2019 Waste pickers' cooperatives and social and solidarity economy organizations. Cooperatives and the World of Work NO. 12. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/waste-pickers-cooperatives-and-social-and-solidarity-economy-organizations#:~:text=12,Waste%20pickers'%20cooperatives%20and%20social%20and%20solidarity%20economy%20organizations,reducing%20the%20amount%20of%20landfill>.

2009, Refusing to be Cast Aside: Waste Pickers Organising Around the World Edited by Melanie Samson Published by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) Cambridge, MA, USA.

Inclusion of waste pickers in Zero Waste programs: the case of Buenos Aires City. Case Studies Series Zero Waste Latin America and the Caribbean Waste Pickers Inclusion. <https://www.no-burn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Seria-docuemntos-GAIA-Caso-4-ingles.pdf>

The Journal of Environment & Development 2021, Vol. 30(4) 369–394 © The Author(s)
2021 Waste Pickers and Their Practices of Insurgency and Environmental Stewardship
Jutta Gutberlet, Santiago Sorroche, Angela Martins Baeder, Patrik Zapata, and Mar'ia Jose Zapata Campos
https://ri.conicet.gov.ar/bitstream/handle/11336/183051/CONICET_Digital_Nro.684caf7c-c75c-4e1e-9bb93d47dbeb7699_B.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y#:~:text=The%20idea%20of%20resistance%20and,strategize%20interventions%20in%20waste%20management.