



Organisation
internationale
du Travail

► The recycling industry

Addressing child labour
and other decent work challenges



An estimated **19-24 million people** worldwide are engaged in recycling: collecting, recovering, sorting, grading, cleaning, baling, or compacting waste, as well as processing waste into new products. Most of these jobs—about 80 per cent—are in the informal economy.

“Sustainable development, decent work and green jobs.” International Labour Conference, 102nd Session, 2013, Report V, p.37

► The Recycling Industry – Addressing Child Labour and other Decent Work Challenges

Population growth, increasing urbanization, and growth of the middle class has increased consumption, demand for raw materials and created more waste. The rapid increase in waste, its negative consequences on the environment, and growing challenges to existing solid waste management systems have spurred public and private interest in recycling. The private sector has invested heavily; industries producing packaging, construction materials, and paper products, among others, are increasingly using recycled materials (paper, plastics, glass, metals, wood, food and garden waste), creating new markets for recovered waste.

While industrial recycling is squarely situated in the formal sector of the economy, the upstream segments of the recycling supply chain may reach deep into the informal sector, intersecting with the centuries-old occupation of waste picking¹. In many countries, informal waste pickers play a crucial role in waste collection, including the collection, sorting and resale of recyclable materials. The positive contribution of informal waste pickers to urban solid waste management from an environmental and economic perspective is well documented, as have the poor working conditions faced by waste pickers, and the harmful consequences of these for workers' health and safety. Inadequate income and social marginalisation are common, along with other associated social ills such as child labour, which occurs in landfills, in waste collection and sorting.

With leading companies in the consumer goods and other sectors committed to using 100% reusable or recyclable packaging by 2025, the demand for recycled material is likely to rise². Because businesses are accountable not only for their own employment practices but also for the practices of their suppliers, child labour and other labour rights violations in recycling supply chains represents a significant risk to the reputation of the industry and requires appropriate due diligence to identify, prevent and mitigate negative impacts.

Leaders and managers in the recycling industry and industries that rely on recycled materials are faced with complex business challenges: How can they ensure a sustainably sourced supply of recyclable/ recycled materials? How can they ensure an inclusive supply chain that does not eliminate the livelihoods of informal waste pickers (potentially pushing workers into more marginal economic activities and driving more children into child labour), while abiding by ethical business standards?

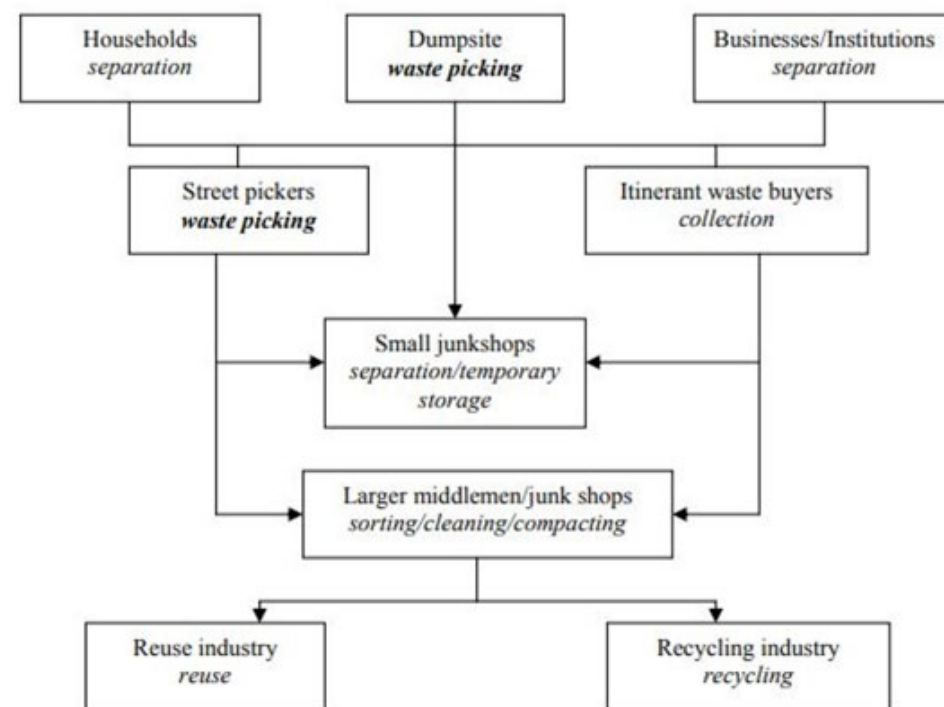
¹ The term “waste picker” refers to those who do the primary collecting and sorting of waste. The derogatory term, “scavenger”, was replaced by the term “waste picker” at the First International Conference of Waste Pickers in Bogota, Colombia, in 2008.

² <http://www.climateaction.org/news/11-leading-companies-pledge-to-recycle-100-percent>

Waste pickers in the recycling supply chain

Resource recovery in most developing and some developed countries relies heavily on informal workers, who collect, sort, and recycle 15%–20% of generated waste.³ Their relatively low labour costs enable low-cost collection and sorting of recyclable waste products. Much greater quantities of recyclable materials are recovered by informal waste pickers than by formal waste management companies.⁴ One NGO study in India estimated that a waste picker collects, sorts and transports anything between 10-15 kg of waste a day in Delhi and those in tricycle carts collect 50 kg a day.⁵ In Brazil there are over quarter million waste pickers. They are responsible for Brazil's high rates of recycling: nearly 92 per cent of aluminium and 80 per cent of cardboard was recycled in 2008.⁶ Similarly, Mexico recycles more than 50% of PET (plastic) produced in the country, exceeding rates in the US, Canada and the European Union, largely thanks to the work of waste pickers.⁷

The diagram below is a simplified map of the recycling value chain and the roles of its various constituents. Waste pickers collect garbage in search of recyclable items like paper, plastic, and aluminium which they sell to scrap dealers and recyclers. They deliver to middle men and/or whole sellers who clean pack and bale and sell to recycling and reuse industries.



Source: Adapted from Marchand, 1998

Covid-19 and the recycling sector

Waste pickers face heightened exposure to the virus, whether in sorting sheds, in the streets or in landfills. Their work entails high exposure to germs, including handling medical waste that may be contaminated, and close proximity to other people.

In countries such as Colombia, recycling was declared an essential service. Waste pickers continue to work during quarantine, and cooperatives are taking protective measures. In other countries such as Ghana, municipal dumps have been abruptly closed.

While the crisis may accelerate efforts to reengineer the recycling industry, governments should consult affected waste pickers, who may be displaced, and take measures to protect their livelihoods.

Source: www.wiego.org

³ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/brief/solid-waste-management>

⁴ ILO "Sustainable development, decent work and green jobs" http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_207370.pdf

⁵ The Wire, "Down in the Dumps: The Tale of Delhi's Waste Pickers" <https://thewire.in/health/down-in-the-dumps-the-tale-of-delhis-waste-pickers> April 2018.

⁶ ILO. 2013. "Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture"

⁷ PET plastic recycling soared 50% last year -57% of plastic consumed is recovered, similar to European Union figures, Mexico News Daily, 2017, May 10 retrieved from: <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/pet-plastic-recycling-soared-50-last-year/>

Social characteristics and working conditions in informal waste recycling

Most waste pickers are poor. Many belong to vulnerable groups: lower castes, recent migrants, refugees, the unemployed, the disabled, women, children, and the elderly. Although driven by poverty and social exclusion, many waste pickers choose to pick waste because it provides the highest possible income or the best range of options in their circumstances.⁸ Waste picking offers easy entry, flexibility of hours and worker autonomy and may offer better returns than other options.⁹ While offering livelihood opportunities to poor and otherwise excluded groups, waste picking exposes workers to variety of dangers and hazards (see box).

Child labour in solid waste recycling

Children are involved in various stages of solid waste recycling: picking in the streets, at dumpsites, individually, with their families or in groups. Children also work in homes and sorting centres. While their parents pick waste in the streets or collect it from households, children often sort the mixed waste at home so that it can be sold. Waste picking, particularly at open dumps, is among the worst forms of child labour. It can damage children's health and stunt their development¹⁰.

Children are exposed to the same hazards as adult workers but because of their age, the risks to their health and well-being are greater. Involvement in waste picking also has negative consequences on children's education. According to a study of children engaged in waste picking by Action Aid India, "Though the children get enrolled in school, they remain absent for long periods and subsequently drop out at the primary stage of education."¹¹ Children involved in waste picking can contribute a considerable share of the family income. Their income varies from 10 to 50% of an adult's income, which makes it difficult to convince their parents to let the children go to school.¹²

⁸ Economic Aspects of the Informal Sector in Solid Waste Management <https://www.giz.de/expertise/downloads/gtz2010-en-Economic-Aspects-WASTE.pdf>

⁹ <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/WIEGO-Waste-Pickers-Position-Paper.pdf>

¹⁰ ILO, "Addressing the Exploitation of Children in Scavenging (Waste Picking): a Thematic Evaluation of Action on Child Labour" October 2004 retrieved from: <http://www.bvsde.paho.org/bvsacd/cd27/scavenging.pdf>

¹¹ The Wire, "Down in the Dumps: The Tale of Delhi's Waste Pickers." <https://thewire.in/health/down-in-the-dumps-the-tale-of-delhis-waste-pickers>.

¹² ILO 2004 http://www.ilo.org/ilroot/docstore/ipecc/prod/eng/2004_eval_scavenging_en.pdf#search=%22addressing%20the%20exploitation%20of%20children%20in%20scavenging%22

Hazards of Waste Picking

Social stigma: because they handle garbage and work in unclean environments, waste pickers and children of waste pickers commonly face suspicion, prejudice and discrimination in the communities where they work.

Poor health and safety conditions: Typically working without any kind of protective equipment, waste pickers are exposed to a range of toxins and microbial or parasitic infections. Working environments are dangerous, especially at open dumps where they can be run over by trucks or become the victims of slides and fires. On the streets and in open dumps, they are exposed to the elements without adequate shelter, and may lack access to clean water, food and sanitation facilities. Waste pickers also face injury from heavy lifting, pushing of laden carts, static postures and repetition. Injuries and disease can cause irreversible damage, especially to children.

Harassment, bribery, and the effects of criminalization: Because their role in waste collection is not formalized and, in some cases, may break laws, they are susceptible to harassment by authorities including beatings, demands for bribes, and arrest.

Lack of social and health protections: Like most informal sector workers, waste pickers do not have access to health services or social security systems that protect them when they become sick or are injured on the job.

EFFORTS TO REDUCE CHILD LABOUR AND IMPROVE WORKING CONDITIONS OF WASTE PICKERS

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has worked to eliminate child labour and promote decent work for adults in waste picking in multiple countries across four continents: Latin America, Africa, Asia and (Eastern) Europe. Though each initiative responded to specific national and sectoral circumstances, some common challenges and principles for effective action have emerged.

▶▶ In 1995, almost all the children picking waste were children of waste pickers themselves. That has changed through some of our efforts. This reinforces our belief that changing the work conditions of parents betters the lives of the children. Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP)¹³

¹³Ibid. "Eliminating Child Labour." <http://www.kkpkp-pune.org/eliminating-child-labor.html>



Ragpickers specializing in fabric, in the slums of the Srinivaspuri area of Delhi. Copyright : Marcel Crozet / ILO

Improving the livelihoods of Adult Waste Pickers

Improving adult workers' social and economic well-being through greater integration with the formal economy and improved access to social protection is critical to sustainably eliminate child labour in waste picking. The organization of informal workers can turn waste management and recycling into a significant opportunity for social inclusion, help improve working conditions, safety and health and earnings and fight child labour.¹⁴

Key solutions proposed include:

- organizing and empowering waste pickers (organizations to improve efficiency and advocate for better working conditions (creating waste picker cooperatives, national and international networks, small enterprises and professional associations);
- improving working conditions (instituting uniforms, specially designed carts and buckets for collection of waste, safe sorting spaces, etc.) and more advantageous access to recyclable material (such as by recovering from the source versus in dumps, contracts with producers of industrial waste, formal recognition of their role in municipal waste management systems); and
- better/more direct access to markets through greater integration with the private sector recycling industry.

Integrating informal waste pickers in formal waste collection and recycling

Brazil was the first country to integrate waste pickers, through their cooperatives, into municipal solid waste management systems and the first to adopt a National Waste Policy, recognizing the contributions of waste pickers and providing a legal framework to enable cooperatives of waste pickers to be contracted as service providers.¹⁵ In 2014, the national movement of waste pickers in Brazil was awarded a contract to clean the stadiums during the World Cup.¹⁶

Other countries in the region have followed Brazil's lead. In 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.¹⁷

¹⁴Ibid. ILO, "Sustainable development, decent work and green jobs."

¹⁵ Chen, Martha. "A virtuous circle: Integrating waste pickers into solid waste management," 03/02/2016 <http://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/virtuous-circle-integrating-waste-pickers-solid-waste-management>

¹⁶ "840 waste pickers contracted to recycle during the World Cup" <http://globalrec.org/2014/06/11/840-waste-pickers-contracted-to-recycle-during-the-world-cup/>

¹⁷ "Waste pickers: the right to be recognized as worker." Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/WIEGO-Waste-Pickers-Position-Paper.pdf>



Boys in a rubbish dump in Manila, Philippines. Copyright Rimando M.

In Mexico, the Sociedad Cooperativa de Seleccionadores de Materiales (SOCOSEMA), formed in 1975, was awarded a concession for the recovery of recyclables in landfills. The creation of SOCOSEMA saw the displacement of the middleman and a rise in incomes of the waste pickers by nearly tenfold.¹⁸ Colombia has mandated that cities across the country should develop solid waste management schemes that contract organizations of waste pickers to collect, transport, and sort recyclable waste.¹⁹ The Bogotá Recyclers Association (ARB), a pioneer organisation of some 5,000 waste pickers, is committed to combatting child labour within its membership; it pays the salaries of several women members who take care of the children while the adults go out to work.²⁰

In Pune, India, a waste picker cooperative SWACH with approximately 10,000 members, supported by its parent union, Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), received a contract from the city for waste collection from households. 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.²¹ Related efforts by KKPKP and other social development organizations to reduce child labour have included annual school enrolment drives, non-formal education classes for children, special schemes of scholarships for child waste pickers, and incentives to complete secondary education and delay age of marriage.²²

Waste pickers organizations benefit members in various ways including through advocacy and negotiation for recognition by municipal authorities including improved access to social benefits, training and skills upgrading, access to financial services, facilitating negotiations with buyers (enterprises, intermediaries) for better prices or access to markets, and enabling economies of scale (buying cheaper inputs, sharing equipment, and lowering costs through pooling of resources and joint sales of production.) Despite these opportunities, waste pickers organizations face numerous challenges including weak institutional capacity, unfavourable legal and regulatory environments as well as other economic and market-related factors that hinder them earning more for their product or from achieving economies of scale.²³

Doing business with waste pickers' organizations

Establishment of regular business relationships with recycling and productive industry can be a win/win arrangement by improving income opportunities of waste pickers' organizations while ensuring a steady supply of recyclable materials.²⁴ There are numerous ways the recycling industry may contribute to decent work for waste pickers within its supply chains. Companies can provide financial as well as non-financial support to social enterprises of waste pickers and informal waste workers. They may support waste pickers to form cooperatives, help them to buy collection equipment and/or provide balers or other equipment. Providing equipment or financing its purchase is useful to waste pickers and increases both their extraction of materials and their ability to transport them efficiently and sell them for a reasonable price. It benefits the end-user industries by increasing their supply of materials, avoiding intermediaries, stabilizing prices; and, importantly, reducing transaction costs and uncertainty.

However, within these arrangements, companies need to take appropriate measures to address the working conditions of waste pickers both within their own facilities as well as those of their subcontractors and suppliers. These measures should include adhering to regulations dealing with minimum age, minimum wage and legally mandated benefits for workers, including health insurance to cover work-related illnesses and injuries, limits on working hours and payment of overtime. It also entails following appropriate OSH protocols including the use of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) in the work places from which the company sources materials. Companies may also contribute to social and educational initiatives designed to prevent child labour and/or mitigate its negative impacts.²⁵



¹⁷ "Waste pickers: the right to be recognized as worker." Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/WIEGO-Waste-Pickers-Position-Paper.pdf>

¹⁸ "Law Reports : Waste pickers in Mexico" Global Alliance of Waste pickers, <http://globalrec.org/law-report/mexico/>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Waste Pickers in Colombia Earn Formal Recognition." Inter Press Service (IPS) <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/05/waste-pickers-in-colombia-earn-formal-recognition/>

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Eliminating Child Labour." KKPKP <http://www.kkpkp-pune.org/eliminating-child-labor.html>

²³ Cooperation among workers in the informal economy: Focus on home-based worker and waste pickers SimelEsim 3 July 2017 http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---coop/documents/publication/wcms_561747.pdf

²⁴ The Waste Experts: Enabling Conditions for Informal Sector Integration in Solid Waste Management: Lessons learned from Brazil, Egypt and India. GIZ. <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/gtz2010-waste-experts-conditions-is-integration.pdf>

²⁵ Ibid.