

# Plastic and waste pickers

## Issues and concerns

**Waste pickers\*** constitute the backbone of the recycling system in many countries by reclaiming, sorting, and selling discarded scrap materials. There are [an estimated 20 million waste pickers worldwide](#) who are predominantly women from socially and ethnically marginalized communities. Plastic comprises approximately [20 to 40 percent](#), and in some cities, [over 50 percent](#) of the waste handled by waste pickers. Consequently, they are one of the most vulnerable occupation groups that stand to be impacted by the global plastics treaty.

[The work of waste pickers is environmentally sustainable, economically productive, and socially inclusive.](#) Their contributions to collection and transportation of recyclables [play a critical role in reducing municipal solid waste management costs and diverting valuable materials from landfills.](#) Located at the base of the pyramid of plastic recycling, waste pickers are one of the key actors in the global plastic recycling market worth [nearly USD 50 Billion](#). Their work decreases the need for virgin material for production, conserves scarce natural resources and energy, reduces water, air, land and climate pollution, and keeps our cities clean.

Nonetheless, [waste pickers are often invisibilized, face low social status](#), have long working hours with difficult and risky labor, and earn low and irregular incomes. They are often perceived as dirty, [criminalized and harassed by citizens, police, municipal workers, and scrap traders](#). They lack access to information, social security benefits, finance, markets, training, and technology, and get little support from local governments.

Waste pickers face the threat of displacement due to competition from organized industry, privatization of waste collection contracts, and lack of access to waste caused by incineration plants and other waste facilities. Municipalities are reluctant to invest in decentralized waste management systems that promote the integration of waste pickers, denying them the time or opportunities to improve their working conditions and transition to newer roles. By failing to mention or acknowledge waste pickers, exclusionary waste management policies including [extended producer responsibility \(EPR\)\\*\\*](#) uproot and disrupt the robust, vibrant informal recycling economy, creating parallel, economically inefficient systems.

**\* Waste pickers:** The first International Conference of Waste pickers in 2008, in Bogota, Colombia adopted the term 'waste pickers,' to delineate these workers to further their organizing and networking, differentiate between other players in the informal recycling sector (scrap traders, re-processors), and circumvent the use of derogatory terms (scavengers).

**\*\* Extended producer responsibility (EPR):** EPR laws aim to make plastic producers and brand owners responsible for the cost of dealing with the plastic waste through the use of different tools, such as requiring companies to manage the plastic packaging, imposing fees or taxes, or providing incentives to encourage companies to ultimately reduce their use of plastic in their products (source: [ELAW](#)).

## Recommendations

The global plastics treaty should:

- **Acknowledge the vital role waste pickers play** in managing plastic waste and the historic contribution they have made since before the formal waste management systems were introduced.
- **Establish and secure the legal frameworks and policies required to improve working conditions for waste pickers** in plastic collection and recovery, and for additional roles they play in education, administration, and reuse and repair systems.
- **Ensure representation of waste pickers as critical stakeholders** in the discussion of transitioning into newer systems, materials, collection, recycling, and distribution options with respect to plastic.
- **Mandate national policies which ensure local governments acknowledge and legitimize the work of waste pickers**, with following approaches:
  - Ensure meaningful participation of waste pickers in the design and implementation of national and local action plans for plastic waste management
  - Develop clear, measurable targets for integration of waste pickers; prioritize waste pickers in plastic waste collection, recycling, sorting, aggregation, material recovery facility management, processing, and other waste contracts
  - Strengthen regulations in the informal sector to ensure safe working environments, financial security, and just transition to newer systems; phase out materials containing or emitting hazardous substances and replace non-recyclable plastic with recyclable and reusable material
  - Hold producers financially accountable for the full economic burden of strengthening informal sector systems operations including collection, transportation, sorting, processing and end-of-life management for all materials, and refrain from creating parallel systems
  - Ensure adequate monitoring and reporting mechanisms to ensure compliance and to properly assess financial and environmental value retrieved by waste pickers

## Pitfalls to avoid

- The continued production of problematic and non-recyclable plastic like multi-layer, single use plastic and sachets, creates additional strain on waste collection systems—a burden that often results in exploitative arrangements and working conditions for waste pickers; toxic additives also pose harm to waste pickers handling the waste.
- Privatization of waste management systems exclude and displace waste pickers.
- Capital-intensive approaches to waste management, such as incineration or plastic-to-fuel, displace waste pickers by burning recyclable materials.

## Further reading

- Allen, Cecilia. 2021. "An Inclusive Recovery: The Social, Environmental, & Economic Benefits of Partnering with Informal Recyclers." Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives. <https://www.doi.org/10.46556/VPKH5682>
- Global Alliance of Waste Pickers. 2021. "The Global Alliance of Waste Pickers Position on EPR." <https://epr.globalrec.org/position-on-epr>