WASTE PICKERS
IN TIME OF CRISIS

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In the context of waste, this worldwide pause in which Covid-19 has put us, brings a series of environmental, social and cultural challenges. These challenges will affect short- and long-term plans of many organizations, groups, the academy, movements and international alliances.

This information aims to provide a diagnosis of the current global situation of waste pickers - informal waste workers that provide a waste management service and contribute to public health and sustainability but lack social and health protection. The following information was sourced from our members on the ground, and we hope will help inform and prioritise lines of action aimed at solving the urgent needs of the waste management system's most vulnerable actors.

**Waste Pickers**

People in the informal waste sector--those who do the critical yet thankless role of collecting and sorting our waste and recyclables without formal recognition and protections from their municipalities-- are now facing a grave threat. 15 million informal waste workers and their families risk losing their livelihood due to Covid-19.

The violation of the fundamental rights of waste pickers has been a matter of constant concern, leading workers to organize at local, regional and global levels. The following list summarizes their demands in response to the critical situation they face today.
Waste Pickers and Human Rights

Violation of the fundamental rights of workers is a matter of global discussion. Among them are:

- Unsafe and unhealthy work conditions.
- Obstacles to safe access to recyclable material.
- Restriction on waste pickers mobility in the city.
- Systems and policies of waste management designed without participation, consultation and consideration of waste pickers.
- Public policies to formalize the work of waste pickers with limited or negative results.
- Replacement of waste pickers and their work by public or private actors.
- Restrictions for the development of organizational models of waste pickers.
- Harassment by the security forces.

Their Demands

National and local governments must provide support measures to meet the following demands identified during this period of crisis:

- Municipal governments must protect waste pickers: it is essential to advocate for immediate alleviate measures of social protection for these workers, ensuring a minimum income that covers their basic needs for food, housing and medicines until their work is restored to normal.

- For those cities and countries where waste collection is still ongoing, waste pickers must be recognized as service providers and guaranteed access to recyclable materials.

- For those cities and countries where waste collection is still ongoing, waste pickers must be provided with the necessary personal protection equipment, sanitation kits and food rations to them and their families.

- To implement key measures for waste pickers with special needs.

- Municipal governments must support services (such as dining areas) provided by the cooperatives.
• To continue working to ensure communication and decent working conditions for waste pickers. The establishment of remunerations for the service they provide will lay the foundations so that in future adverse situations they do not compromise neither safety nor dignity.

• To promote among municipalities and decision makers powerful zero waste programmes that support local economies and contribute to local resilience.

What Organizations and Individuals Can Do

Organizations and individuals have come together to discuss action strategies that support the demands of waste pickers globally. Those strategies must include the demands above mentioned. Some of the actions are:

• To share information related to the demands, actions and measures taken by the waste pickers for the protection of the health and work of their union.

• To support those actions through releases, statements, to promote statements by waste pickers and to activate communication with relevant public bodies (Ministry of Environment, social development, public defenders and other equivalent characters depending on the country) to accelerate the implementation of state assistance.

• To support in all public instances the position of waste pickers as a fundamental actor in the recycling chain that goes beyond this temporary situation associated with Covid-19, and whose role in waste management provides a shield against constant attempts to privatize waste management and promote incineration.
Some Considerations

The implementation of measures that protect waste pickers in the performance of their work or that require the temporary cessation of their activity under favorable conditions for them would not only benefit waste pickers. It would allow them to maintain social distance and the necessary security measures to increase the probability that the epidemic curve will flatten. This would slow down the spread of the virus and allow health systems to better cope with it; essentially, supporting waste picker rights will keep us all safer and healthier (Wiego 2020).

The extreme situation we are facing brings to light the urgent need to improve the working conditions of millions of workers in the world, including waste pickers.

The COVID-19 pandemic reveals the historical debt of several countries and entire regions to waste pickers, who enable continuous improvements to waste management systems, increasing reuse, recovery and recycling rates for the benefit of nature and society.

This pandemic highlights the opportunity behind the promotion of local recycling systems, through which alternative ways of solving the collection and protection of workers would be accessible and faster to implement.

The only formula that guarantees practical and appropriate interventions is through the collaborative work of decision-makers at local and national levels to provide a coordinated response to the disaster. Waste pickers who organize at local, national and regional levels, community and social organizations committed to the promotion of the rights of waste pickers, along with many local governments, are the ones that must champion the demands of waste pickers.
Appendix

How have waste pickers faced the crisis until now?

**Source**: WASTE PICKERS: Essential service providers at high risk (e investigación propia)

**Argentina**: The Federación de Cartoneros, Carreros y Recicladores de Argentina issued a statement calling to respect quarantines since the State provided an "emergency family income" for informal and self-employed workers with lower incomes. Likewise, they request that the routes of large generators (shops) be maintained with a minimum guard in the classification centers and support for the dining areas they maintain. And that the municipalities support with subsidies or protective equipment to independent waste pickers, who are forced to go out to collect. They have also asked people to take some precautions when they take out their recyclables.

**Ghana**: In Accra, the Kpone Waste Picker Association will provide hand sanitizer and protective equipment (such as masks, gloves and water) to its members. They are also engaging other waste pickers to raise a single voice to the government to demand that it considers the informal sector.

**Brasil**: In Brazil, a law was passed creating an emergency basic income of approx. US $115 for informal, independent, non-fixed income workers, among other categories, that will be paid during the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The measure includes all waste pickers, both those who work in cooperatives or associations and those who work independently.

The challenge now is to spread that information to all independent workers who work on the streets. Regarding waste pickers, there is no census that identifies their work routes. In addition, there is no public sector commitment to establish an action plan for integrating waste pickers into a selective collection and sorting system for recyclable materials.
This is also due to the omission of the private sector, that is, of the waste generating companies, which do not pay for the services provided by the associations and cooperatives. All these points were already included in the PNRS (National Solid Waste Policy) approved in 2010.

There has been enough time for this to be implemented, however, it has not been achieved due to lack of political will from governments and by the lack of commitment from companies.

**Colombia:** The National Association of Waste Pickers, ANR, has offered recommendations to prevent the spread of the coronavirus while continuing to provide the public service for the management of recyclables, within the framework of the Public Service for Waste Management in Colombia. The ANR has asked that the government to NOT prohibit recycling and recognize that waste pickers are on the streets as service providers, a request that has been accepted and will allow collection centers to open, with various security measures-- that citizens be informed about the urgency of source segregation, and the identification of garbage bags that come from people infected with virus, and that waste pickers have access to personal protective equipment and handwashing and soap.

**South Africa:** The South African Waste Pickers Association is calling on all waste workers to take care of their health at this difficult time. SAWPA calls on national and local governments and citizens to help, support, finance and work comprehensively with waste pickers, and to ensure adequate sanitary measures.

**Chile:** The National Association of Waste Pickers of Chile is urging organizations and individuals to support their demands for social security. Chile has some cooperatives but waste pickers do not have a fixed income. A public statement by the Association is currently circulating detailing these demands.
India: The Alliance of Indian Waste Collectors has asked the Prime Minister of India for support, including an emergency basic income of INR 10,000 per month per household.

Francia: AMELIOR in Montreuil, France reports that the government has implemented an order for everyone to isolate themselves at home. Since waste pickers have been unable to work for days and have no money or food, the organization is contacting each waste picker to know about their situation.

More Sources

https://www.wiego.org/covid19crisis

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