

Report

Global Alliance of Waste Pickers

JUNE 2022

Special edition about the participation of grassroots waste pickers in UNEA, the United Nations summit on plastic pollution.

UNEA RECOGNIZES THE PROFESSION OF 20 MILLION WASTE PICKERS AROUND THE WORLD

A RECOGNITION THAT MUST SHIFT FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

The fifth meeting of the United Nations Environmental Assembly was held in March 2022. The aim was to reach agreements that are vital to successfully reduce plastic pollution globally. During the assembly, the initial dispositions on resolution 5/14 of the UNEA were established for the Intergovernmental Negotiation Committee, in order to design an international and legally binding instrument.

In her opening speeches at the Multilateral Forum and the Open Composition Workers' Group meeting on the plastics treaty, Inger Anderson referred on numerous occasions to the work of waste pickers in plastic recycling and their contribution to reducing plastic pollution.

Inger Anderson assured the waste pickers that UNEP will ensure their participation and continue to finance it in future negotiations about the plastics treaty process.

Inger Anderson is the Executive Director of the United Nations Environmental Programme

This edition of UNEA called for what they labelled: **'Ending plastic pollution: towards an international legally binding document'**.

The INC's mission is to create a new global agreement on plastic pollution. The deadline to reach a resolution is December 2024. This resolution would then be addressed at a full conference in 2025.

Now, over the following (five) INC sessions, the negotiators must organise and prioritise the topics for debate. Based on previous INCs for Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), one of the main tasks for the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) that met in Dakar between 29 May and 1 June, is to establish the work programme, study the rules of procedure for the negotiations, select the members for the table and agree on dates and venues for future INC meetings.

These global agreements prove there is a collective interest in searching for ways to reduce levels of plastic pollution. These agreements, with their resulting debates and commitments by governments worldwide, have been happening for years, but this time is different, for two important reasons:

- 1. The emergency caused by pollution, which has devastating effects on the environment and on living beings and urgently needs to be addressed. Either measures are taken, or the planet dies.**
- 2. For the first time since these conferences focusing on the environment and climate change began, an invisible sector has been included. 20 million grassroots waste pickers from around the world participated. This is a huge step towards the recognition of this silent yet strategic profession that has been cleaning the planet for over 60 years, without contracts, insurance or state financing.**

Necessity and recognition met in Dakar: the need to save the planet from pollution and the recognition of a trade that has been fighting for the aforementioned for a long time.

The waste picker leaders elected as spokespersons by the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (Globalrec) to represent our demands, had to face an unknown world, where representatives (ambassadors, ministers, delegates, etc.) from countries around the world hold sessions and negotiate global agreements about environmental policies. This is the context in which our colleagues were speaking and seeking support for our petitions for legally binding participation. Not only to be recognized and for our knowledge to be valued, but also to participate in the Intergovernmental Committee of Nations negotiations.

After two days of negotiations, we can affirm that the need for nations to reiterate their commitment to the participation of waste pickers in future negotiation meetings still stands.

Results of the Plastics Treaty meeting in Dakar regarding our profession

The report strongly recommends UNEP (United Nations Environmental Programme) to guarantee our participation in future meetings about the plastics treaty, referred to as INC (Intergovernmental Negotiating Committees). The report may not be as powerful as the Rules of Procedure, but it remains powerful enough to obtain further resources from UNEP in order to participate with a larger delegation of waste pickers in future meetings.

Chile, Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay, Canada, Kenya, Norway, Peru and Ecuador are our main allies in the process. Norway helped to reach a compromise, because the South American governments wanted waste pickers to be mentioned in the Rules of Procedure, whereas Canada and the E.U. defended the idea of an umbrella list of stakeholders to be included, meaning other stakeholders, apart from waste pickers,

would be included, such as Indigenous Peoples. This way, the list would gradually expand. On this point, Norway suggested that waste pickers be mentioned in the report to guarantee inclusive participation. Kenya intervened in the last plenary session to mention our inclusion and asked the Secretariat (UNEP) to prepare a report suggesting ways to ensure significant forms of participation for workers in informal and cooperative recycling systems.

This is a compromised victory, but a victory nonetheless, because the delegates discussed the role of waste pickers in detail. Additionally, being included in the meeting report remains a powerful achievement. UNEP has also been asked to elaborate a report to find significant means of participation for waste pickers.

For the first time, informal waste pickers are mentioned in a United Nations environmental resolution. The waste picker delegation participated in a press conference that brought the event to a close, in which they expressed their satisfaction with the major advances achieved with respect to the consolidation of the recognition attained in UNEA. They highlighted that the waste picker delegation's mission was for nations to support the effective participation of waste pickers in negotiations about plastic and to encourage countries to involve grassroots waste pickers more, integrating them into discussions on local waste policies, not just as a workforce, but as a valuable and recognized trade with the right to a just transition and payment for the service provided.

Likewise, the meeting in Dakar was an opportunity for Senegalese waste pickers to gain visibility, a key step towards future conversations with the authorities.

RECYCLING WITHOUT WASTE PICKERS IS GARBAGE.

WE ARE THE FACE OF RECYCLING ON THE PLANET.

<https://globalrec.org/2022/02/22/declaration-wastepickers-inclusion-unea/>