

# Group of Friends of Waste Pickers

**BACKGROUND** – We waste pickers collect approximately 60% of all the plastic that is collected for recycling globally. With our work in plastic waste collection, sorting, aggregation and sale for recycling, we play an essential historical and current role in reducing plastic pollution, reducing carbon emissions and strengthening the circular economy. We come from poor, humble and marginalized backgrounds, oppressed castes, working classes, religious and ethnic minorities and indigenous communities. Due to the nature of our work, we are exposed to hazardous working conditions including exposure to air, water and soil pollution, heat and high humidity.

The working conditions are taking a severe toll on our health. With climate change becoming a day to day reality, the average daily temperature is increasing, and in many parts of the world we face frequent flooding and wildfires. With the face of these natural disasters, we are vulnerable to many more health risks and loss of livelihood and income than the average person. We also face other threats that contribute to our loss of livelihood such as the increasing privatization of waste management, waste to energy or incineration of waste, and exclusion through other public policy interventions in plastic waste management, including the omission of our work in the norms of Extended Producers Responsibility. Despite all of this, we are not disheartened We create work for ourselves by engaging in waste-picking and recycling, and try to earn a decent livelihood day by day.

Many countries and local governments have begun to recognize the role we play in plastic waste management and are establishing norms to mandate waste-picker integration and partnership in waste management.



We are receiving contracts from municipal authorities to engage in the domain of waste management. We are increasingly viewed as popular environmental educators and organizers in the fight for environmental justice and rights. In this context, our involvement is therefore crucial to the formulation of the Plastics Treaty. It is a moral and ethical obligation that member states recognise the role we play in plastic waste management and recycling and involve us meaningfully in the process to frame the Plastics Treaty.

In order to participate in the global plastics treaty negotiations, we are organizing ourselves at the international level through the International Alliance of Waste Pickers (previously the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers).

Through this Alliance we are following the ongoing discussions to frame the plastics treaty. With the support of Women in Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), our Alliance has managed to send a delegation to this year's United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA 5.2) in Nairobi, Kenya. UNEA 5.2 was an opportunity for Member States and stakeholders to share best sustainability practices and create momentum for governments to build back better through green and sustainable recovery plans, following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Representing labour interests in the assembly's plenary session, the Alliance's delegate and President of the Asociación Movimiento Nacional de Recicladores de Chile (ANARCH), Soledad Mella, read a statement calling for recognition of waste pickers in the international legally binding instrument on plastics pollution.

Governments at UNEA formally agreed to negotiate by 2024 a global plastics treaty, an internationally legally binding instrument designed to end plastic pollution and establish a science-policy panel on chemicals and waste and to prevent pollution. In a historical moment for waste pickers, the plastics treaty mandate mentions that waste pickers' contribution to collecting, sorting and recycling plastics is recognized and that we need to learn from the best practices of informal and cooperative settings.

**The two paragraphs which have been included in the resolution of UNEA 5.2 are provided here:**

- PP12 bis Recognizing the significant contribution made by workers under informal and cooperative settings to collecting, sorting and recycling plastics in many countries.
- OP3 (a) quarter Lessons learned and best practices, including those from informal and cooperative settings.

This marked the 1st time that workers in informal employment are mentioned in a United Nations environmental resolution. [Watch the moment](#) when UNEA5.2 approves the adoption of a mandate to negotiate a Plastics Treaty to End Plastic Pollution.



**OBJECTIVES** – The core objectives of the Group of Friends are to mobilize and coordinate political and technical support to ensure that the interests of waste pickers are reflected in the treaty, and to ensure that the knowledge and expertise of waste pickers informs the treaty discussions.

**SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES:**

- To serve as a platform for regular exchange, dialogue and consultation among member state representatives, groupings and specialized agencies about experiences and good practices with waste pickers to inform the plastic treaty debate
- To provide a forum where member state representatives and engage with and learn from waste pickers and their associations.
- To coordinate positions in areas of the negotiations related to waste pickers
- To enhance advocacy and outreach activities in areas of the negotiations related to waste pickers
- To provide the forum for waste pickers to speak and share ideas and concerns about the ongoing process, with less time limitation.

**TIMELINE** – The Group of Friends will function throughout the plastic treaty negotiation process. The group will be officially launched in the first Intergovernmental Committee meeting to negotiate the plastics treaty in November 2022.



**GENERAL PRINCIPLES:**

The Group of Friends adheres to these principles:

- Waste pickers, whether in formal associations/cooperatives or informal settings, are workers, and play a critical role in recycling.
- Waste picker organizations are the legitimate representatives of waste pickers and the Friends agree to be guided by such organizations in the negotiation process.
- Waste pickers, along with other workers in the plastic system, deserve a just transition to fairly-remunerated, healthy and sustainable work in every country.
- Waste pickers must be represented in every stage of national policy design, as the treaty is implemented.
- The details of waste pickers involvement in the global plastics treaty process within the respective countries shall be communicated and shared publicly.

**MEMBERSHIP** – Participation in the Group of Friends is voluntary, informal and led by the Member States. Membership is open to all UN Member States who wish to actively participate.