



IAWP's Vision for a Just Transition for Waste Pickers under the UN Plastics Treaty

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Full length version of this report at: <https://globalrec.org/jtreport>

The International Alliance of Waste Pickers is a union of waste picker groups representing more than **460,000 workers** across **34 countries**

THE IAWP FIRMLY BELIEVES THAT THE FORTHCOMING UN PLASTICS TREATY HAS THE POTENTIAL TO NOT ONLY ADDRESS GLOBAL PLASTIC POLLUTION BUT ALSO BRING ABOUT A TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN THE CONDITIONS AND RIGHTS OF WORKERS IN MATERIALS MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS. TO ACHIEVE THIS, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT MEMBER STATES INCLUDE DETAILED MANDATES FOR A JUST TRANSITION THROUGHOUT THE UN PLASTICS TREATY, INCLUDING IN A DEDICATED ARTICLE ON JUST TRANSITION AND ACTIONABLE GUIDELINES IN AN ANNEX. THIS WOULD REPRESENT A CRUCIAL STEP IN RECOGNIZING WASTE PICKERS AND ACKNOWLEDGING THEIR HISTORIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO PLASTIC POLLUTION REDUCTION.

GREAT VALUE, GREAT CHALLENGES: WHY WASTE PICKERS MUST BE INCLUDED



Globally, up to 85 per cent of recycling chain workers are informal¹, and many if not most of these workers depend on the recovery and processing of plastics.² Waste pickers constitute most of the workers in informal and cooperatives settings in the waste sector. Our work feeds families, and contributes to basic sanitation and the human right to a clean environment³, while actively combating pollution and reducing greenhouse gas emissions⁴. It also protects marine life and livestock and prevents plastics from causing drain blockages and subsequent flooding. Waste pickers manage approximately 60 per cent⁵ of the world's plastic waste that is collected for recycling, contributing to a more circular economy. Furthermore, our work lowers costs to municipalities by filling gaps in waste management and extending the lifespan of dumpsites and other waste processing infrastructure.

Despite our significant contributions, waste pickers are among the most vulnerable stakeholders within plastics value chains. We are frequently excluded from formal labour markets and marginalized due to the stigmatization of waste and poverty. Most of us are self-employed without recognition as workers and, as a result, without labour rights. We typically earn meager incomes under hazardous and precarious working conditions,

and are often economically exploited – including within plastics value chains, where there is virtually no implementation of business and human rights principles. Women and children in the sector face particular challenges.

The privatization of waste management, which can be fueled by policies like Extended Producer Responsibility and other circular economy investments, diverts valuable materials away from us while also displacing municipal public workers from secure jobs. Additionally, constant disruptions caused by extreme weather events, criminalization of our work and the use of public space, and disruptive policy changes all hinder our ability to do our jobs and plan for the future.

As plastic waste and pollution grows, governments are promoting formal waste collection and management systems without properly acknowledging the role of waste pickers. Investments and policy responses often fail to safeguard our livelihoods⁶.

To address these issues, new materials management processes must be built upon two fundamental principles: **genuine integration with legal recognition of our work** and a **just transition that allows for our incorporation**.

CLEARLY DEFINING WASTE PICKERS: A CRUCIAL STEP



While others have provided definitions of waste pickers, we contend our definition is more precise because it encompasses not only waste pickers but also the ecosystems in which we operate, recognizing those who engage in solidarity economy, cooperatives, and the informal economy. These interconnected roles put waste pickers in the best position to cope with plastic pollution from a life cycle approach.



WASTE PICKER REGISTRATION IN MANGAUNG FREE STATE, SOUTH AFRICA. REGISTRATION RENDERS WASTE PICKERS ELIGIBLE FOR VARIOUS GOVERNMENT AND INDUSTRY PROGRAMS, INCLUDING ELIGIBILITY FOR SERVICE PAYMENTS UNDER THE COUNTRY'S EPR REGULATION. PHOTO: LEFA MONONGA

The systems, modes of operation and management in which waste pickers work differ widely, as do the forms and degrees of organization. Some work autonomously, while others belong to local organizations, many of which are affiliated with IAWP. In countries like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, India, and Kenya, waste pickers have organized into large national movements.

We argue that regardless of the systems or structures within which waste pickers work, their contributions must be recognized through a just transition.

The IAWP defines waste pickers in its Constitution⁷ as:

“people who participate (individually or collectively) in the collection, separation, sorting, transport, and sale of recyclable and reusable materials and products (paper, plastic, metal, glass, and other materials) in an informal or semi-formal capacity, as own-account workers, or in a cooperative or social and solidarity economy setting, and as workers who subsequently achieved formal work arrangements through their organizations. Our description includes itinerant waste pickers, current and former waste pickers who have new roles and engagement in waste pickers' organizations, and those who have been integrated into municipal solid waste management systems and continue to retrieve, sort, and sell recyclables.”

LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND: WHAT A JUST TRANSITION INVOLVES



The IAWP advocates that **just transition⁸ be both a core obligation and a cross cutting issue within the means and measures of implementation in the UN Plastics Treaty**, which should provide clear recommendations for implementing just transition in national, state and municipal action plans. More specifically, in the zero draft⁹, the IAWP asserts that the principles of a just transition for all workers be integrated throughout the treaty text. **We advocate for a dedicated Article for a just transition, and an annex with co-developed mandatory targets for the sustained integration of waste pickers.** A just transition begins with identifying and prioritizing waste pickers as workers, and with adequately defining them in the treaty.

Aligning with trade unions, environmental justice movements and the ILO, we define Just Transition as: **ending plastic pollution in a way that is as fair and inclusive as possible to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind.** It is based on recognizing those already working at all stages of the plastic value chain and their fundamental principles and rights at work, their human dignity, and their historic contribution. It involves maximizing the social and economic opportunities of ending plastic pollution while minimizing and carefully managing challenges – including through effective social dialogue among all groups impacted. Plans for a just transition must

build and improve upon systems that waste pickers have already established while guaranteeing better and decent working conditions, social protection, more training opportunities, appropriate technology transfer, support for infrastructure and organizing, and greater job security. Specific implementation will depend on local context and consultation.

IAWP advocates for guidelines and toolkits in the UN Plastics Treaty to support member states with implementing their obligations related to a just transition and the protection of human rights.

These essential components provide a roadmap for crafting the recommended just transition Article within the Plastics Treaty, for supplementing other Articles, and for formulating supplementary guidelines for just transition within an Annex.

1 Recognition of waste pickers within informal and cooperative settings in national, provincial, and municipal legislations and norms, policies and laws – Recognition must confer legal entitlements for livelihood and social protection. Legal frameworks should aim for wealth and opportunity distribution to impacted workers, workers in the informal economy, and specifically marginalized populations.

2 Universal registration of waste pickers and other workers in plastics value chains – This should be mandated by national laws and policies. Several steps are identified to facilitate registration and enumeration:

- A. include waste pickers as an occupational category within country level statistics and labour force surveys
- B. establish local and national databases with stringent data protection protocols that include worker demographics and roles
- C. involve trained counselors and or waste pickers themselves to facilitate registration and overcome reluctance and fear
- D. include detailed plans for research and mapping to identify all actors in materials management systems
- E. ensure registration does not criminalize unregistered waste pickers or carry burdensome registration requisites or financial or tax implications.

3 Transparency, oversight and adaptation – Member states and producers should implement mandatory processes to report plastics waste targets and engagement with waste pickers, provision of social protections, and improvements in waste picker income and working conditions. Periodic public independent audits should be mandated, including a financial and socio-economic review of any management body within a given system.

4 Direct involvement and advancement in policy making and implementation processes – IAWP recommends the establishment of public governance committees or fora that effectively include workers in the informal economy and other marginalized waste actors.

5 Social and labour protections and safeguards – These should apply to all workers in the materials management system and should be rights-based and universal in scope, governed and delivered by the state, and financed through production-oriented contributions such as EPR, product taxes and other means.

6 Fair remuneration, living wages and sustainable livelihoods – This applies to waste picker organizations, as well as to waste pickers who have not been integrated into formal employment arrangements.

The full report provides additional detail of these essential components and examples of how they have been integrated into existing programs and policies in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, India, South Africa and the United States. We have also elaborated on the conditions necessary for us to remain and advance in the materials management sector, drawing on examples from many countries.

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7 Formalization and strengthened organizing – Governments should support and provide incentives to help waste pickers build strong democratic organizations, which can help integrate workers into formal employment and develop skills important for a just transition.

8 capacity building and reskilling/upskilling and appropriate technology – Governments should track and report on labour market trends to ensure that any reskilling will be successful over the long term, and should report on the outcome of re-training efforts.

9 Improved materials management
This includes:

- A. Minimization of packaging and phasing out of non-recyclable materials.
- B. Design and funding of services for reuse and repair that engage waste pickers.
- C. Mechanical recycling targets and minimum recycled content mandates.
- D. The phase-out of potentially hazardous materials and mandated testing of new technologies/materials to ensure safety.
- E. Domestic processing of materials to prevent the flooding of markets with imported plastic scrap, which lowers prices, over-burden local recycling systems and undermines waste picker incomes.
- F. Prioritization of the [regulated] management of non-recyclable or hard-to-recycle materials over recyclable materials with pre-existing robust, economically viable markets.
- G. The prevention, prohibition and elimination of climate-intensive, destructive technologies like incineration and pyrolysis/chemical recycling.
- H. Clear, truthful labeling of materials to ensure safe handling and processing by waste pickers and recyclers.
- I. New opportunities for waste pickers and other marginalized waste sector stakeholders through shifts in materials management.



WASTE PICKER MEMBERS OF MUMBAI'S RAMAI COOPERATIVE PROVIDE DOORSTEP WASTE AND RECYCLABLES COLLECTION IN THE WORLI KOLIWADA FISHERMEN'S COMMUNITY. PHOTO: UMESH JADHAV



WASTE PICKERS SORT AND PROCESS RECYCLABLE MATERIALS AT THE PARQUE PATRICIOS GREEN CENTER (CENTRO VERDE) IN BUENOS AIRES, WHICH WAS PROVIDED BY LOCAL GOVERNMENT. PHOTO: MOVIMENTO NACIONAL DOS CATADORES DE MATERIAIS RECICLÁVEIS (MNCR)

EXISTING PRECEDENTS PROVIDE GUIDANCE



The UNEA 5/14 resolution¹⁰ recognizes the “significant contributions” of and urges learning lessons from “workers in informal and cooperative settings to the collecting, sorting and recycling of plastics in many countries.” The Basel Convention includes recommendations on how to address the environmentally sound management of waste in the informal sector¹¹. However, the Basel Convention’s “Guidance on how to address the environmentally sound management of waste in the informal sector” does not specifically address and protect human and workers’ rights¹². **IAWP advocates for guidelines and toolkits in the UN Plastics Treaty to support member states with implementing their obligations related to a just transition and human rights.**

The Plastics Treaty can also draw on how the Minamata Convention on Mercury¹³ addresses the informal Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining (ASGM) sector, which includes a dedicated Article (Article 7) and an annex (Annex C) providing guidance for the integration of the sector, listing targets and strategies to facilitate formalization, baselines, stakeholder involvement and financial assistance.

Furthermore, many waste picker movements around the world have facilitated a just transition for workers as clearly stated in our position on just transition¹⁴, which should be learned from in the crafting of just transition policy and practice.

- 1 ILO. 2013. “Sustainable Development, Decent Work and Green Jobs.” International Labour Conference, 102nd Session. Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_207370.pdf
- 2 Singh, Richa. 2021. *Integration of Informal Sector in Solid Waste Management: Strategies and Approaches*. Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi. <https://www.cseindia.org/integration-of-the-informal-sector-10894>.
- 3 UN. General Assembly (76th session) 2021-2022. UNGA Resolution 76/300. The human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.
- 4 See WIEGO’s Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions through Inclusive Recycling: Methodology & Calculator Tool at <https://www.wiego.org/ghg>.
- 5 Pew and SYSTEMIQ. 2022. *Breaking the Plastic Wave: A Comprehensive Assessment of Pathways Towards Stopping Ocean Plastic Pollution*. https://www.systemiq.earth/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/BreakingThePlasticWave_MainReport.pdf
- 6 Cass Talbott, Taylor, Pinky Chandran, Cecilia Allen, Lakshmi Narayan and Owusu Boampong. 2022. *Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and Waste Pickers*. WIEGO Technical Brief No. 15. Manchester, UK: WIEGO. <https://www.wiego.org/publications/extended-producer-responsibility-epr-and-waste-pickers>
- 7 See <https://globalrec.org/constitution>
- 8 The ILO defines just transition as greening the economy in a way that is fair and inclusive to everyone concerned, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind. See (ILO): *Frequently asked question on just transition*.
- 9 UNEP/PP/INC.
- 10 UNEA Resolution 5/14 entitled “End plastic pollution: Towards an international legally binding instrument”. https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/39812/OEWG_PP_1_INF_1_UNEA%20resolution.pdf
- 11 Tsakona, M., Ruceska, I., Dias, S. Khaled, D. 2022. *A Seat at a Table: The Role of the Informal Recycling Sector in Plastic Pollution Reduction, and Recommended Policy Changes*. GRID-Arendal. Available at <https://www.grida.no/publications/863>
- 12 UN Habitat and NIVA. 2023. *Leave no one behind*. https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2023/04/en_2503_leaving_no_one_behind.pdf
- 13 UNEP. 2021. *Minamata Convention on Mercury*. UNEP/MC/COP.4/6. https://minamataconvention.org/sites/default/files/documents/working_document/4_6_ASGM_Guidance.English.pdf
- 14 See: full length JT report <https://globalrec.org/jtreport>