

BREAK FREE FROM PLASTIC

EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS OF PLASTIC POLLUTION

Waste Pickers: Unsung Heroes of the Fight Against Plastic Pollution

Waste pickers are a founding group of the Break Free From Plastic (BFFP) movement, and have a deep understanding of both the challenges and opportunities in addressing the injustices pertaining to plastic pollution. To build a just transition towards a future free from plastic pollution, we need to understand and learn from their expertise and experience on the ground to collectively build solutions.

WASTE PICKERS ARE MATERIAL EXPERTS, WITH A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT CAN BE RESOLD OR RECYCLED

Waste pickers collect and transport recyclable materials such as plastic, paper, PVC, cans, cardboard, metals, and e-waste. Operating mostly on foot, by bicycle, or using small motorised vehicles, waste pickers gather these materials from streets, landfills, and households and in some cases, they store them in their homes or yards until the materials are clean and sorted, a task predominantly handled by women. Waste pickers transport the material to scrap dealers/manufacturing companies and sell them for prices set by the secondary materials industry. There are 20 million waste pickers globally and they are rightfully demanding full recognition of their work and a voice in decision-making processes that affect the future of waste management and solutions to plastic pollution.



'Recycling without waste pickers is garbage'. Source: John Chweya, President of the Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association.

WASTE PICKERS FACE INTERSECTING FORMS OF CLASSIST, RACIST AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC FORMS OF OPPRESSION AND ARE SUBJECT TO DEHUMANISING TREATMENT AND SYSTEMIC EXCLUSION

According to [WIEGO](#), approximately 1% of the global population is engaged in informal waste collection. Waste pickers' activities yield significant environmental benefits as they

prevent materials from being littered, disposed of or untreated. Despite their critical role in environmental protection, waste pickers' fundamental rights are frequently disregarded and they are excluded from official waste management practices and decision-making. The vast majority of waste pickers work informally, which means they lack socio-economic protections such as stable salary, health insurance, or pension. These precarious conditions leave them vulnerable to health risks, financial insecurity, and various forms of discrimination.

Waste pickers face occupational health hazards as they are directly exposed to landfills or waste containers, often without the necessary personal protective equipment (such as gloves, overalls and masks) or access to health insurance or basic medical coverage. As a result, waste pickers are more likely to suffer from infections or to develop serious medical conditions, including cancer. Most cannot afford medical treatment, as their limited income is often prioritised for essential expenses such as food. With no pension, many continue working well into old age. Moreover, informal employment prevents access to credit from financial institutions, further exacerbating financial insecurity.

Because this informal work is not licensed, waste pickers may face fines and they may often face harassment from law enforcement and the general public, who often stigmatise their work. For instance, in Northern Macedonia, waste pickers who collect materials from street containers—legally falling under the municipality's collection system—are frequently fined.

Brokers can enter the chain between waste pickers and companies/manufacturers as they have resources to transport and store recyclables, which creates a challenging and oppressive dynamic that diminishes waste pickers' direct income.

Corporations employ double standards (notably in the Global South) where they put products and packaging on the market made from materials which have no value in the waste management trade as they cannot be recycled (composite packaging, sachets, diapers, styrofoam, etc.).

In Europe, notably in the Balkans, the majority of informal waste pickers are from Roma communities, along with other disadvantaged minorities. In the Roma population, waste pickers are often whole families, including children. Young boys often join their fathers and elder siblings in street or dump picking, and women typically participate in processing and cleaning the materials that have been collected.

Women processing recyclables at home are essential to the work, but often only receive indirect income. If women waste pickers participate in dump picking, they are often prevented from extracting the more valuable materials, and may specialise in plastics, which have a lower market value. Women waste pickers face additional discrimination and are often treated with even more prejudice and disrespect compared to their male counterparts.



Waste pickers in Kenya. Source: John Chweya, President of the Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association.

ACROSS KENYA, LATIN AMERICA, THE CARIBBEAN AND BEYOND, WASTE PICKERS COME TOGETHER TO DEMAND RECOGNITION AND IMPROVED WORKING CONDITIONS

Wastepickers face similar challenges nationally, regionally, and even globally, and many have decided to organise and advocate for their working conditions, decent employment, better waste management and inclusion in policy making.

In Kenya, waste pickers began organising at the county level and over time formed a national umbrella 'Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association', which comprises over 7,000 waste pickers today. The association's mission is to advocate for formal recognition of waste pickers, fundraise for protective personal equipment, ensure that wastepickers are included in relevant conversations and decisions (such as about extended producer responsibility), and are an integral part of any future systems to manage waste and reduce and phase out toxic substances in plastic.

In addition to these efforts, they organise community clean-ups, which help teach the community about waste, and show that there is a lot that the communities can learn from waste pickers, which in turn helps debunk socio-economic stigma.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, waste pickers are united through an association called ANARCH, which is a part of the global alliance with over 500 organisations.

These efforts are paying off as waste pickers have been part of UNEA 5.2, are recognised in the resolution, and involved in the Global Plastics Treaty negotiations. These accomplishments fill waste pickers with pride and optimism, as they continue to make strides toward a more just and sustainable future for all.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Even though the EU has strong policies on recycling and waste management, they often leave out informal workers. Countries seeking to join the EU are required to prioritize recycling, but they don't always ensure that no one is excluded. Informal waste pickers play a crucial role by helping cities cut disposal costs, yet their contributions are often ignored.

In countries like Serbia and North Macedonia, waste management systems are struggling because there isn't enough knowledge about proper waste collection, and recycling and reuse aren't a priority. Waste collectors, who have been doing this work for years—even in tough conditions—are rarely included in planning these systems. Despite their essential role in collecting and sorting recyclables, they remain left out of formal waste management.

CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR WASTE COLLECTORS: EXAMPLE OF COOPERATIVE MODEL IN NORTHERN MACEDONIA


An inspiring example of how informal waste collectors can be integrated into formal systems comes from Redi (Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative) recycling, a licensed startup social enterprise that established a new system for primary waste separation and collection and started employing formerly unlicensed waste collectors.

The company mapped buildings and companies willing to adopt waste separation practices and started collecting from there thus also respecting the law because the waste inside a building belongs to the household unlike the waste in the street containers that falls under the municipality's mandate. Plastic and paper were the first materials to be collected and transported to Redi containers on electric tricycles, and then by a bigger truck to a warehouse.

This model has not only improved waste separation and heightened public awareness around recycling, but it has also transformed the working conditions for previously informal waste collectors who now have formal employment, social benefits, and increased safety measures during collection. This also resulted in increasing the dignity of waste collectors, and changing the perspective on Roma people. The company plans to expand to Serbia and Albania and expand to collect biowaste and e-waste.

WASTE PICKERS PLAY A PIVOTAL ROLE IN MANAGING THE WORLD'S WASTE

Waste pickers' work is indispensable, yet their contributions are frequently overlooked and undervalued: they are key to removing tons of waste from landfills and oceans, and their involvement is essential in global discussions, such as the Global Plastics Treaty negotiations. Waste pickers are the unsung heroes of environmental protection and they deserve access to health care, education, housing, and the right to live in peace and dignity.



This is a summary of key messages shared by speakers at two subsequent Break Free From Plastic Europe's Intersectionality Forums in July and September 2022, whom we thank for their contributions, namely:

Asib Zekir, programme manager at the Roma Entrepreneurship and Development Initiative (REDI) Recycling

Soledad Mella, representative of the Global Alliance of Waste pickers and president of the Asociación Movimiento Nacional de Recicladores de Chile (ANARCH)

Jelena Nešić, innovation specialist at sustainability cooperative Springloop, and Democratic Transition Initiative (DTI)

John Chweya, President of the Kenya National Waste Pickers Welfare Association

Krishna, Operator at the Dry Waste Collection Centre (DWCC) in Bangalore, India