

# Topic Sheet

# Just Transition



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The transformation of the plastics economy towards a circular model must be fair, just and inclusive; ensuring that no one is left behind, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This topic sheet includes considerations for policy makers and treaty negotiators to recognize the role of actors operating in the informal waste sector and their contributions in transitioning to a circular economy for plastics and in ending plastics pollution.

## Why it is important to recognize informal waste activities?

Estimates suggest that the informal sector is responsible for 58 per cent of all the plastic waste collected and recovered globally<sup>1</sup>. These informal recovery activities are largely linked to urban areas and contribute significantly to the reduction of waste in landfills and dumpsites, reducing the leakage of plastics into the environment<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, where present, these activities generate economic benefits for the informal waste pickers and other workers in the plastics waste value chain<sup>3</sup> as well as

the municipalities, which in turn incur less costs for waste collection and transportation.

Despite the significance of their work, informal waste pickers and other workers in the plastics value chain remain under-recognized at national and local levels. Their activity is characterized by unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low or irregular incomes, long working hours and a lack of access to information, markets, finance, training and technology<sup>4</sup>.

## What does ‘just transition’ mean?

A just transition towards a circular economy for plastics could be defined as the process of designing, promoting and implementing actions to transition to sustainable production and consumption of plastics in a manner that is fair and inclusive of everyone concerned, including waste pickers and other workers in the plastics value chain, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind<sup>5</sup>.

Currently there is no commonly agreed terminology to refer to just transition, nor definition of the informal waste sector and its workforce. Agreeing on a common terminology and key definitions is an important first-step to advance discussions and avoid miscommunication.

<sup>1</sup> Lau, W. W. Y., Shiran, Y., Bailey, R. M., Cook, E., Stuchtey, M. R., Koskella, J. et al. (2020). Evaluating scenarios toward zero plastic pollution. *Science* 369(6510), 1455-1461. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aba9475>.

<sup>2</sup> Linzner, R. and Lange, U. (2013). Role and size of informal sector in waste management – a review. *Waste and Resource Management* 166(2), 69-83. <https://doi.org/10.1680/warm.12.00012>.

<sup>3</sup> Other workers in the downstream part of the plastics value chain include for instance: intermediate traders, apex traders and end-of-chain recyclers.

<sup>4</sup> [https://gridarendal-website-live.s3.amazonaws.com/production/documents/s\\_document/971/original/aSeat\\_final.pdf?1663316145](https://gridarendal-website-live.s3.amazonaws.com/production/documents/s_document/971/original/aSeat_final.pdf?1663316145).

<sup>5</sup> UN-Habitat and NIVA. (2022). Leaving no one behind. [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/11/un-habitat\\_niva\\_report\\_leaving\\_no\\_one\\_behind\\_1.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/11/un-habitat_niva_report_leaving_no_one_behind_1.pdf).

**Terminology and definitions:** The above definition of a just transition and other terminologies listed here are developed based on definitions used in existing multilateral environmental agreements and by organisations including the ILO, IAWP, WIEGO and UN-Habitat. The proposed definitions have been adapted to the ongoing discourse surrounding just transitions, inclusion of workers in informal and cooperative settings, and preparatory documents for the first intergovernmental negotiation committee (INC) meeting on plastic pollution.

**Informal waste sector:** sector of the informal economy where workers and economic units are involved in solid waste collection, recovery and recycling activities that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements.

**Waste pickers:** workers who recover recyclable products and materials from public spaces, open dumpsites, landfills or from waste generators in an informal or

semi-formal capacity, as own-account workers or in cooperative settings. Waste pickers (including informal waste collectors) sell the recovered items and materials to intermediate or apex traders, or drop them at formal or informal collection points<sup>6</sup>.

**Plastic recovery value chain:** Involves several steps of the recovery industry that purchases, processes and trades plastics, from the point plastic is extracted from the waste generators until it is reprocessed into materials, products or substances that have market value. In many countries, this involves several trade relationships in which value is typically added at each step, through segregation and processing of plastic waste, involving waste pickers/collectors, intermediate traders, apex traders and end-of-chain recyclers.

Additional terminology and definitions can be found in the report by UN-Habitat and NIVA (2022) [Leaving no one behind](#).

## What would a just transition look like?

For a just transition towards ending plastic pollution, the following underlying elements would be in place:

- **Harmonized glossary of terms and definitions are included in legislative frameworks:** National, provincial and municipal laws and norms related to waste management, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), social protection and national action plans on plastics pollution would include (or reference) harmonized and commonly agreed terms and definitions including waste pickers and other workers engaged in the plastics value chain. Examples of national laws and norms that include such terminology in a harmonized manner can be drawn from frameworks in India, South Africa and Colombia.
- **Informal waste sector is formalized** following the ILO recommendation R204<sup>7</sup>, which sets a framework that is comprehensive by design but that can be tailored to the context-specific needs for its implementation.
- **Nation-wide census of waste pickers is conducted regularly:** As a part of the national (plastics) action plans, local government would conduct regular surveys of waste pickers and their working conditions (to set baselines) and repeat such surveys regularly for monitoring and improvement purposes (e.g. regular frequency, possibly aligned with other national census efforts). Data and information collected during the census, should be aggregated in a database of waste pickers available at local and national level, with data protection norms in place. Among others, Pune<sup>8</sup> in India and Johannesburg in South Africa can be looked at for examples of surveys of waste pickers carried out by city authorities.
- **Key actors are engaged from planning stages:** Involvement and integration of key actors along the plastics value chain, including waste pickers, in planning plastic waste management programmes and operations of plastic waste management facilities is among the elements that would constitute a just transition. This would include ensuring open channels of communication for informal waste pickers and other workers in the plastics value chain to feed into wider waste management decisions and strategic planning processes to ensure consistency of approaches and to support the co-creation of waste management systems between the informal and formal waste sectors. Examples of cities that have engaged waste pickers in the design and planning stages of waste management programmes and of the just transition, are Buenos Aires, Johannesburg<sup>9</sup>, Pune, Bengaluru and Mumbai.
- **Fair remuneration is set:** Criteria for setting fair remuneration particularly for most vulnerable categories of workers (e.g. waste pickers) would be defined at national level, for implementation at local level.

<sup>6</sup> This definition has been discussed and agreed between UNEP, UN-HABITAT, WIEGO and is an evolution of the definition of waste pickers and waste collectors from the report by UN-Habitat and NIVA, as well as the definition included in the constitution of the IAWP.

<sup>7</sup> ILO Recommendation 204 - Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204). [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:R204](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R204).

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/IEMS-Pune-Waste pickers -City-Report.pdf](https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/IEMS-Pune-Waste%20pickers-City-Report.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Waste picker integration guideline for South Africa. (2020). <https://www.gtac.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Waste-Picker-Integration-Guideline-for-South-Africa.pdf>.

- **EPR systems<sup>10</sup> are just and inclusive:** national EPR systems would involve and integrate waste pickers and other workers in the plastics recovery value chain from the planning stages, ensuring fair remuneration agreed by all parties (governments, producers and waste pickers/other workers) as well as investments in infrastructure for plastics waste management.
- **Social protection coverage is guaranteed:** the social protection framework highlighted in paragraph V. of ILO Recommendation 204<sup>7</sup> would be adopted and implemented. Ensuring fair, safe and inclusive access to waste sites would ensure that informal waste pickers are not disadvantaged or excluded from important sources of collectable material. Well-run safety-conscious waste sites and the provision of safety equipment are important to the welfare and health of informal waste workers.
- **Access to finance is enabled:** Governments and financing institutions would design and operationalize landing schemes accessible to waste pickers and other more vulnerable actors in the plastics value chain (e.g. small businesses). Different from micro-financing, for instance, micro-credit lines would guarantee low interest rates, and have minimal bureaucratic hurdles for users (e.g. simple application process and minimal eligibility criteria). As an example, the Government of India provides such a facility through the National Safai Karmacharis Finance and Development Corporation<sup>11</sup>.
- **Skills and awareness are enhanced:** Skills would be boosted for waste pickers and waste pickers organizations to ensure that the information and skills necessary to engage in decision-making processes are available and to enable these stakeholders to move-up in the plastics value chain. Targeted capacity support for other actors in the plastics value chain would also create opportunities for shifting towards new business models, and circularity approaches. Public awareness on the important role consumers play in a just transition towards a circular economy for plastics and of the waste sector (formal and informal) would be key to overcome negative social perceptions and stigma.

## How could a global approach support a just transition?

Harmonised international action could accelerate the move towards a just transition by considering the following elements:

1. **Advance an international dialogue to discuss just transition.** This dialogue could discuss how to implement a just transition towards a circular economy for plastics for waste pickers and other workers in the plastics value chain. It would be important to include local governments representatives, recognizing the key role municipalities play in implementation and enforcement of decisions. The dialogue could allow for waste pickers to share their experiences so that the discussion can draw on the existing knowledge and expertise of waste pickers and move towards an implementable direction, that does not leave anyone behind and ensures a gender responsive approach. This dialogue could focus on:
  - Agreeing on common terminology and including a definition of just transition and waste pickers. Common terminology and key definitions are an important first-step to advance discussions and avoid misalignment. The definitions proposed in this topic sheet for just transition, waste pickers, informal waste sector and plastic recovery value chain are developed jointly by UNEP, UN-HABITAT IAWP and WIEGO and are based on definitions used in existing multilateral environmental agreements and by organisations including the ILO, as well as definitions proposed in the report by UN-Habitat and NIVA (2022).

<sup>10</sup> The Global Alliance of Waste Pickers position on EPR. <https://epr.globalrec.org/position-on-epr/>.

<sup>11</sup> National Safai Karmacharis Finance & Development Corporation (NSKFD) Landing Policy. <https://nskfdc.nic.in/writereaddata/files/LPGBROCHURE.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Taron, A, Drechsel, P. and Gebrezgabher, S. (2021). Gender dimensions of solid and liquid waste management for reuse in agriculture in Asia and Africa. [http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/Publications/wle/rrr/resource\\_recovery\\_and\\_reuse-series\\_21.pdf](http://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/Publications/wle/rrr/resource_recovery_and_reuse-series_21.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Central Bank of Nigeria. <https://www.cbn.gov.ng/devfin/smeeispage.asp>.

- Develop matrices to monitor progress and include them in monitoring frameworks of any international or national action. A standardised method of monitoring progress towards a just transition that is based on pre-defined indicators, definitions and methodologies could be established. National action plans by all parties could be developed with targets and indicators for the just transition, so that parties could monitor their progress on just transition under the global instrument. Indicators could include:
  - i. SDG Indicators 8.3.1 (proportion of informal employment in total employment, by sector and gender), 8.5.1 (average hourly earnings of employees, by gender, age, occupation and disability status) and 8.7.1 (proportion and number of children aged 5 to 17 years engaged in child labour, by gender and age) disaggregated to reflect Informal Waste and Recovery Sector (IWRS) workers.
  - ii. Measures to monitor effective enforcement of legislative frameworks by the competent authority of the governments such as labour inspectors. Labour inspectorates have an important role to play in effective monitoring and implementation<sup>14</sup>.
- 2. Consider adequate international support, including capacity building and financial resources to implement national and international action following the just transition elements suggested in this topic sheet, among others. Possibilities of economic instruments could include setting the framework for a just and inclusive EPR system (including a globally coordinated fee or tax).

## Good examples of just transitions

### Integration in waste management and EPR engagement

India: the following examples are from three organizations, members of the Alliance of Indian waste pickers:

- SwaCH (Pune)
  - <https://globalrec.org/2021/03/29/reflections-on-epr-based-systems-targeting-multi-layered-plastics/>.
  - <https://epr.globalrec.org/case-study/swach-pune-india/>.
- Street Mukti Sanghatana (Mumbai)
  - [https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/migrated/publications/files/Chikarmane\\_WIEGO\\_PB8.pdf](https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/migrated/publications/files/Chikarmane_WIEGO_PB8.pdf).
- Hasiru Dala (Bengaluru). [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305892556\\_A\\_Working\\_Observation\\_on\\_the\\_Dry\\_Waste\\_Collection\\_Centers\\_in\\_Bangalore](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/305892556_A_Working_Observation_on_the_Dry_Waste_Collection_Centers_in_Bangalore).

### Integration in waste management

- The work of FACCYR- UTEP in Argentina, (Integration in Waste Management).

### Extended producers responsibility:

- African Reclaimers Organization, Johannesburg, South Africa: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342976454\\_Final\\_Technical\\_Report\\_Johannesburg\\_Case\\_Study\\_Lessons\\_from\\_Waste\\_Picker\\_Integration\\_Initiatives](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342976454_Final_Technical_Report_Johannesburg_Case_Study_Lessons_from_Waste_Picker_Integration_Initiatives).

### Engagement with businesses as a part of reverse logistics model

- Brazil: Associação Nacional de Catadores e Catadoras de Materiais Recicláveis (ANCAT). [https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Dias\\_WIEGO\\_PB3.pdf](https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Dias_WIEGO_PB3.pdf). <https://epr.globalrec.org/case-study/brazil/>.

### Role of NGOs in the just transition and gender responsive actions

- Mumbai. <http://www.satyamevjayate.in/dont-waste-your-garbage/ngo-stree-mukti-sanghatana.aspx>.

For additional case studies and other resources on just transitions of the informal waste sector, please consult the GPML Digital Platform. The platform also provides opportunities to engage and connect different stakeholders involved and advocating for a just transition.

<sup>14</sup> UN-Habitat and NIVA. (2022). Leaving no one behind. [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/11/un-habitat\\_niva\\_report\\_leaving\\_no\\_one\\_behind\\_1.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2022/11/un-habitat_niva_report_leaving_no_one_behind_1.pdf).

## Additional resources

**UN-Habitat and Norwegian Institute for Water Research [NIVA].** (2022). Leaving no one behind. How a global instrument to end plastic pollution can enable a just transition for the people informally collecting and recovering waste. <https://unhabitat.org/leaving-no-one-behind-how-a-global-instrument-to-end-plastic-pollution-can-enable-a-just-transition>.

**United Nations Environment Programme [UNEP].** (2021). 'NEGLECTED: Environmental Justice Impacts of Marine Litter and Plastic Pollution'. <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/neglected-environmental-justice-impacts-marine-litter-and-plastic-pollution>.

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