

Executive Summary

Waste Pickers in Pune, India

Recent statistics show the majority of workers in developing countries earn their livelihoods in the informal economy. The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) is a qualitative and quantitative study designed to evaluate the reality of these workers' lives. Through research conducted over three years in 10 cities, the IEMS aims to provide credible, grounded evidence of the range of driving forces, positive and negative, that are affecting conditions of work in the informal economy. Informal workers and their membership-based organizations (MBOs) are at the centre of the analysis.

The Research in Pune

In Pune, India, the IEMS sample of 150 was randomly drawn from the membership database of Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union with over 9,200 members, and SWaCH, a workers' cooperative. Sex and source of materials were the study's two main variables. In 2012, focus groups were held with 73 waste pickers; a survey was administered to the focus group participants, as well as 77 other waste pickers. Of the 150 participants, 93 were women and 57 were men (women account for more than 70 per cent of the KKPKP membership).

Three categories of waste pickers were involved: itinerant waste buyers, itinerant waste pickers, and fixed waste collectors. The latter are those who have been integrated into door to door collection as members of SWaCH, which has a memorandum of understanding with the Pune Municipal Corporation.

Fixed waste collectors gather co-mingled or segregated organic and recyclable waste. Itinerant waste pickers recover recyclables from the street and dump sites on the street, and from businesses but not from residences. Itinerant waste buyers purchase recyclables. Categories of workers have different sources of income: fixed collectors receive payment both from households and from the recyclables they sell. Itinerant waste pickers earn revenue only from the sale of recyclables. Itinerant buyers purchase from the collectors and waste pickers and earn income from re-selling the recyclables up the chain.

Key Findings

The study finds that waste picking in Pune remains confined to the Scheduled Castes and has disproportionately large numbers of women. The



Photos: J. Luckham and L. Vryenhoek

population is characterized by high levels of illiteracy – only 1 per cent of adults in the households having completed secondary school – and a larger household size than in the general population. The informal waste sector offers employment opportunities to illiterate, socially excluded jobless workers.

An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents (85 per cent) reported that they are the main income earners in their households, and more than 95 per cent of their households depend on the informal economy for survival. The participants are primarily own account workers, usually working alone without any paid or unpaid help, and the work is year-round.

The study captured the total turnover for the waste pickers in each category, though not their incomes, as it did not consider all inputs costs related to earnings. It was clear that men have higher turnovers than women, and that women fixed collectors enjoy higher turnovers than other types of women waste pickers as well as more stability in their earnings. Itinerant waste buyers clock the longest working hours and have overall turnovers about 30 per cent higher than in the other categories.

Overall, 47 per cent of the survey respondents complained of fallen revenues over the previous year. Most respondents cope with fallen revenues by cutting down personal expenses and by borrowing. Fifteen per cent of the survey respondents had taken up additional jobs.

Driving Forces

During the research, the waste pickers ranked and discussed factors that helped and hindered their pursuit of a living. Waste pickers all perceived a threat to their ability to access recyclables and thus to their livelihoods. However, the effects of driving forces varied by type of waste picker. Factors related to the city – specifically, the threat that private companies could be contracted to collect waste and competition from large companies interested in recycling – affects fixed collectors, while removal of municipal skips for “beautification” affects itinerant waste pickers most. A proliferation of scrap dealers is particularly threatening to itinerant waste buyers. The value of the itinerant waste buyers’ “trade knowledge” was said to be eroding, as the increasing presence of scrap dealers encouraged waste generators to by-pass the itinerant waste buyer and sell directly to the dealer.

Direct sale by industrial waste generators to waste management companies and large traders also negatively impacts the waste pickers. “We used to pick stuff from a place where this company used to burn their waste. We would still find things.... now they don’t burn it – they call a truck and it all gets taken away.... What’s left for us?”

Macroeconomic Forces

In the survey, waste pickers identified a range of negative macroeconomic forces, particularly large



Photo: Courtesy KKPXP

variations in income and too many competitors. Seventy per cent of survey respondents reported instability of prices of recyclables to be a problem, and several mentioned that they assume the risks of market fluctuations and seasonal variation. Overarching macroeconomic factors – the rising costs of living and the proliferation of waste pickers, including through migration – affects all types of pickers and were the two most cited problems in focus groups. The absence of social protection in the context of rising costs of living was also a concern.

Value Chain Dynamics

Those who generate the waste were ranked as the most positive force in the value chain; scrap dealers were in second place. Focus group participants reported that scrap dealers provide them with a market for their materials, easy credit, working capital, annual bonuses, and transport for the materials.

Itinerant waste pickers occupy the lowest rung on the value chain, and itinerant waste buyers just a rung above. A male itinerant waste buyer highlighted the injustice in the sector when he said, “The entire recycling industry depends on us. However they are not ensuring their profits reach us in equal measure.”

Relations with Government

Relations with local officials were cited as both negative and positive. Provision of push carts, safety equipment and storage/sorting facilities to fixed collectors by the city was considered an important positive factor. The focus groups also highly valued provision of medical insurance. The data available from the MBO revealed that 14 per cent of the survey respondents had benefitted from the medical insurance scheme in which the municipality paid the premium; however, employees of the municipal government in waste-related work get full medical cover for all ailments, unlike informal waste workers.

Fixed collectors interacted most with city officials, but only 23 per cent said police and city officials helped them in their work. Some said that they were admonished for not segregating properly, and one complained about having to pay the driver of the municipal vehicle to take the organic waste. Some waste pickers felt the municipality blamed them for problems, but took credit for their work. Others noted that inadequate service by the municipality confounded their work. Itinerant waste pickers did not have too much interaction with the municipality, but mentioned being blamed and fined for littering around the municipal skips.

A lack of allocated space was also a problem. Some mentioned losses because of rotting or degradation of picked waste during the monsoons due to lack of sheltered storage space; others said there were health issues related to having to use the vicinity of their home for dumping and sorting work.

Connections with the MBO

The workers' organization was accorded relatively greater positive importance than the scrap traders. Focus group participants spoke about the benefits that the organization offered, including life insurance, medical benefits and support for children's education. The role of the workers' organization in facilitating consultative processes for resolving issues was brought up in a focus group discussion related to the entry of private waste management companies. Some waste pickers mentioned with appreciation the organization's advocacy on larger issues such as food security and universalization of old age pension, though older members expressed concern that demanding changes could threaten the programme's existence.

The data also offer some possibility that survey respondents who had been involved with their MBO for longer had higher earnings.

Waste pickers' Contributions

Waste pickers sourced their materials primarily from private households (82 per cent), the "general public" (88 per cent), and formal businesses (93 per cent), indicating they are closely linked to the formal economy and highly relied upon by Pune's residents. A third also reported selling to informal businesses. Fixed collectors and itinerant waste buyers had more direct relationships with residents and businesses; 73 per cent of fixed collectors and 68 per cent of itinerant waste buyers believe that the general public recognized and appreciated their services, compared to only 40 per cent of the itinerant pickers.

Primary waste collection (from generators) is carried out by fixed waste collectors as part of a memorandum of understanding between their cooperative and the city government. These fixed collectors supply organic waste to composting plants operated by or with the permission of the municipal government and to municipal or municipally-contracted bio-methanation waste to energy plants.



Photo: Courtesy KKP

Itinerant waste buyers purchase better quality recyclables and other junk from waste generators. This prevents junk and better quality recyclables from entering the municipal waste stream. The recovery of recyclables from municipal skips, transfer stations and the streets by itinerant waste pickers reduces the quantity of waste handled by the municipal secondary waste collection system. In addition to providing services to residents and businesses, and offering low-cost or no-cost service to the municipality, the waste pickers take pride in helping to clean the city.

Waste pickers face an indifferent or hostile policy environment and increasing competition from recycling formats considered more "modern." Yet today's waste pickers noted some positive developments – many are embracing new technologies and efficiencies and adapting to changes in the external environment. Itinerant waste buyers and fixed collectors routinely referred to the use of mobile phones to be in touch with customers, municipal officials and each other. Motorized transport or push carts are replacing head loading as a way of transporting goods. There was also mention of electronic weighing scales and the collection and sale of e-waste in the focus groups.

Regardless of their pride in contributing to the city, many waste pickers said they face hostility and ill treatment by some citizens, and that the work remains dangerous and difficult. Occupational health and safety was identified as a problem by three-quarters of all waste pickers, and 91 per cent of itinerant waste pickers, who manually segregate co-mingled waste. As one focus group participant expressed, "The city gets healthier, but we get sicker. Big needles, glass, rose thorns, all those things injure us."

Policy and Advocacy Recommendations

1. Recommendations for National and State Social Security and Welfare Policy

- a. **Create a universal, state-funded non-contributory social security floor to address vulnerability of informal waste pickers and other workers** – The IEMS findings clearly reveal that waste pickers' households are vulnerable to economic stresses against which they do not have the cushion of social security and welfare measures. Universal provision of a basic social security floor that includes subsidized food rations; free primary, secondary and tertiary medical care; disability and death insurance; maternity benefits and early childhood care; and old age pension, disability pension/allowance and destitution pension/allowance, is a socially just and efficient option.
- b. **Use occupation as a criterion for rights-based entitlements** – Entitlements for socially excluded castes and communities exist, but certification of caste is stringently monitored and often recorded during passage through formal education channels. The data show most present day waste pickers have been outside the formal education system and are thus unable to secure the 50-year proof required in Maharashtra State. Occupational status, on the other hand, is easily established through survey and/or registration. The occupational criterion has been accommodated in the national Socio-economic Caste Census (SECC), and waste pickers feature in the list of socially vulnerable groups in the SECC.

2. Recommendations for City and State Policy

- a. **Create a comprehensive Municipal Solid Waste Resources (Handling, Management and Recycling) Act** – Solid waste management falls in the municipal-government/public domain, governed by multiple official Acts, while recycling falls in the industrial-private domain and is subject to industrial policies. Sustainable integrated solid waste management requires that the public/government domain in-source the private recycling domain so that they complement each other. This study reveals that informal waste pickers handle and manage resources, not only waste discards. The required coordination demands a comprehensive municipal solid waste resources handling, management and resources law based upon economically, socially and environmentally sound principles of waste management.
- b. **Develop land allocation policies and building control rules to recognize waste workers' needs** – Land allocation policies must reflect that informal waste pickers need space to carry out classification of recyclables and to



Photo: Courtesy KKP

process organics. Private property owners who generate waste, as well as municipalities that need to arrange for collection, transport and processing, must allocate private/public land for waste management operations (just as building construction rules require the allocation of space for parking and amenities). Municipalities should also consider appropriate decentralized land allocations for small scrap traders and scrap markets; intermediate scrap processing units; weekly "junk" and second hand goods markets; and depots for collecting used clothes, books and other items.

3. Recommendations for Labour Policy

- a. **Explore processes for registration and decent work for all waste pickers** – While some informal workers are protected by labour legislation pertaining to specific occupations, there is no set process for registration of informal workers not covered by occupation specific legislations. The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, enacted in 2008, has been ineffective. A national policy or Act – such as a Recovery and Recycling Workers Protection of Livelihoods and Employment Act or a Solid Waste Management and Recycling Workers (Promotion, Regulation, Welfare and Conditions of Service) Act – should be explored.
- b. **Create enabling conditions for occupational health and safety of waste pickers** – All three classes of workers involved in this study – own account waste free collectors, itinerant waste buyers, and own account worker members of the cooperative – provide important services on which the municipality relies. The municipal government needs to create the enabling conditions that will allow better working conditions, occupational health and safety, and worker benefits.

c. **Promote upskilling, infrastructure, credit for waste and recycling enterprises** – Waste pickers, for the most part, are illiterate and not formally skilled. The upskilling of younger waste pickers has promising potential for increasing efficiency and remuneration in existing work as well as for moving them up the value chain. The provision of infrastructure and credit can enable them to diversify into other services and industries. Waste picker organizations should advocate upskilling, credit and infrastructure support from municipal, state and specific agencies that have the mandate to provide support to disadvantaged groups.

d. **Promote the organization of waste pickers** – The study finds the organization of waste pickers in Pune has brought significant gains to waste pickers. Waste pickers are often overlooked by trade unions, development NGOs and politicians because they are numerically smaller, women more often than men, and therefore less likely to be organized or involved in local political processes. They are largely without voice and “invisible” and this is exacerbated by their caste. Greater efforts to organize waste pickers are required, especially as contractor-led and corporate privatization are aggravating the vulnerability of waste pickers.

4. Recommendations for Energy, Industrial and Commerce Policy

a. **Recognize the legitimacy and vibrancy of the recycling sector** – The scrap market is not recognized as a legitimate commodities market and the robust, market-driven informal waste collection/recycling sector is absent in policy documents (except when addressing the desire to supplant indigenous models in favour of corporatization and newer systems). The private-public partnership policy of the government as it exists in waste management



Photo: Courtesy KKP KP

favours large multi-year corporate contracts. Worker owned micro-small-medium enterprises would be able to do segments of the work at lesser costs, enabling far greater returns to the municipalities.

b. **Provide incentives for informal trade and processing of secondary commodities** – Secondary commodities are a boon to formal manufacturing industries. The use of secondary materials avoids extraction costs of virgin materials and lowers manufacturing costs, thus the labour of informal waste pickers produces savings through the low energy, low cost, high efficiency recovery, collection, trade and intermediate processing of materials. Provision of subsidized infrastructure, low interest credit, tax concessions and providing for better, safer and more remunerative options for workers would have social benefits. Because waste management and recycling are labour intensive, for example, employment could increase.



Inclusive Cities: Launched in 2008, the Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organizing, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes. Inclusive Cities is a collaboration between MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs and those supporting the work of MBOs.

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