



Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing

February 2016

Informal Economy Monitoring Study Sector Report: Waste Pickers Executive Summary

Waste pickers provide solid waste collection in various cities around the world and sustain their livelihoods by reselling or making personal use of recyclable materials. Waste pickers from the Global South and beyond include: people sifting through garbage in search of food, clothing, and other basic daily needs; informal private collectors of recyclable materials who sell to middlemen or businesses; or even collectors/sorters of recyclable materials who are organized into unions, cooperatives, or associations. Despite circulating in various public spaces, waste pickers are largely invisible and stigmatized. The environmental and economic contributions of these informal workers to local governments, local communities, and value chains in many ways are unrecognized.

Waste pickers are one of the three urban informal worker groups – along with street vendors and home-based workers – who are the focus of the 10-city Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS). The IEMS seeks to provide more recent and in-depth evidence of the contributions and challenges this group of informal workers faces across various cities. In addition, it looks to the way these workers respond to such challenges and how institutions help or hinder them in the process. The IEMS was a collaborative effort between researchers and membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers in each city. Waste pickers from Belo Horizonte, Brazil; Bogota, Colombia; Pune, India; Nakuru, Kenya; and Durban, South Africa participated in the study.

IEMS is based on both quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative component of the study consists of a participatory design that sought to capture workers' own perceptions and understanding of their realities through focus groups. Fifteen focus groups of approximately five participants were conducted in each city-sector. The quantitative component of the study consists of a survey administered to the 75 focus group participants per city-sector in addition to another 75 workers who did not participate in the focus groups. A total of 760 waste pickers participated in the study.

Key Findings

Individuals, Households and Enterprises

The waste pickers in the sample take part in various activities related to the handling of waste, ranging from collecting, composting, sorting, and processing and selling. Some waste pickers are also involved in administrative activities and political representation.

Unless waste pickers form organizations and choose to work collectively, waste picking is typically a highly autonomous form of labour in which the worker determines his or her own work schedule, decides what to collect, where to collect it, how to collect it, and to whom to sell. Waste picking in the five cities is not a seasonal activity. In Pune, for instance 90% of the waste pickers worked 12 months of the year.



Over 43 per cent of the surveyed men and women waste pickers were between the ages of 26 and 40, and nearly 21 per cent were between 41 and 50 years of age. Approximately 80 per cent of the waste pickers in the sample across the five cities had some primary or secondary schooling. Only 25 per cent of respondents reported having another work activity, thus indicating the relevance of informal waste picking as a main source of income. In addition, 56 per cent of men and 61 per cent of women waste pickers have worked in the sector for five or more years. In keeping with what workers perceive as benefits from an autonomous form of work organization, two-thirds of waste pickers surveyed in the five cities reported that they were own-account workers.

Driving Forces

Findings from the study reveal how workers across the cities are mainly concerned about two negative driving forces – value chain dynamics and city or government policies. Low prices and price fluctuations were common complaints across the cities related to value chain forces. Lack of laws, policies, and programmes that would serve to protect the informal workers and improve their working conditions was also mentioned as significant negative city drivers. It should be noted that there are striking differences across cities. In Nakuru and Durban, 72 per cent and 73 per cent of survey respondents, respectively, stated that lack of formal permission to work negatively affected their work. These differences can be attributed to several factors, such as the level of sector organization and government willingness and commitment to inclusivity. Factors such as harassment and lack of basic infrastructure were also mentioned as other relevant negative city forces. In all the cities, though to a significantly lesser degree in Belo Horizonte, focus group data highlighted problems with some kind of abuse of authority. Forty-seven per cent of respondents in the survey sample stated that harassment was a key issue, given that 54 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women mentioned this problem. In addition, the lack of, and/or improvement of, existing infrastructure for sorting, storage, and processing of recyclables and safety measures also affects workers, as it negatively impacts workers' productivity and increases the chances for workers to have their materials, and even personal items, stolen.

Macroeconomic forces were mainly noted by waste pickers in Pune and Bogota, which does not mean these forces do not affect waste pickers negatively in the other cities. Rather it indicates that waste pickers may not be as aware of how macroeconomic policies affect their work or that they tend to take greater notice of it in times of severe crises. Among the macroeconomic forces waste pickers noted was the increasing competition from other waste pickers, the rising prices, and the low prices of recyclable materials. In three focus groups in Bogota, participants linked decreases in recyclable prices to the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed between



Waste picker in Bogota. Photo: J. D. M. Mulford

Colombia and the United States in 2011, exhibiting an awareness of how broader macroeconomic policy shaped dynamics within the recycling value chain in their country.

Focus group findings also identified the positive drivers in cities. Value chain dynamics were the most frequently identified positive driving force in Durban, Nakuru, and Pune. Government policies and practices were most frequently cited in Belo Horizonte, and “other” driving forces were most frequently mentioned in Bogota. Belo Horizonte stands out when it comes to the role of city / government as being a positive driver, reinforcing the importance of establishing channels of negotiation for the recognition of waste pickers' roles in solid waste management. When focus group participants made reference to the positive role of city / government practices, they often highlighted national and municipal government departments and the provision of materials and equipment.

Responses and Mediating Institutions

Overall, focus group data showed that approximately two-thirds of waste pickers are responding to different types of negative drivers on an individual level. Under a quarter of the responses occur at the organizational / collective level, while a small proportion was at the household / family level. Macroeconomic drivers were the only negative driving force for which there were a significant number of responses at the household level.

Organizational / collective level responses featured most prominently in Bogota and in Belo Horizonte, where waste pickers have been organized for many decades and where organizations are strong. The one anomalous situation was in Pune, where only just over one-fifth of responses were organizational / collective, despite the long history and strong presence of the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) trade union and SWaCH cooperative in the municipality.

Both the focus group and the survey data sought to capture the ways mediating institutions either positively or negatively impact waste pickers. Of the 402 total mentions to important institutions, private businesses were mentioned most frequently (131 references) across the five cities, followed by local government (95 references), community institutions and actors (58 references), and waste picker organizations and networks (50 references). Private businesses feature as more important institutions because they create a surplus of recyclables, especially when businesses donate materials instead of selling them to waste pickers. There was also general consensus that waste picker organizations and networks, NGOs, and international financial institutions played a positive role and assisted waste pickers in all five cities.

Linkages and Contributions

IEMS findings from the five cities show that waste pickers are not only one of the main stakeholders in formal solid waste systems, intersecting with these systems at several points in complementary ways, but are also an integral part of the recycling value chain and, thus to the formal economy. Survey findings reveal that over 75% of waste pickers reported that formal businesses are the main buyers of products, reinforcing the connection between informal workers' close links to the formal economy.

Waste pickers across the IEMS cities reported a range of services they offer, which vary from city to city: waste removal (in some of the cities this is the only service available in particular areas), transportation, recovery of recyclables, value-aggregation, semi-processing, and even composting and biogas production (only in Pune). In addition to public cleaning services and feeding the industries with recyclables, workers also reported ingenious ways of marketing materials collected.

Many focus group participants claimed they contribute to their city in a variety of ways: protection of the environment, city cleanliness, job creation, security, local development, public health, and encouragement towards cooperativism, among others.

Theoretical & Policy Implications

Theoretical Implications

In spite of the waste pickers' own perceptions of how they contribute to the economy and environment, study findings reveal a series of constraints linked to the integration of waste pickers within the formal systems of solid waste management (SWM). Difficulties faced by waste pickers are amplified when the public sector is weak or absent, which also impacts their position in the value chain. It is important to clarify that formal integration of membership-based organizations (MBOs) within SWM does not imply a lack of conflicts or challenges, as socio-technical systems are in constant transformation as a result of global processes,



Waste picker in Belo Horizonte. Photo: S. Dias

changes in the institutional landscape (governments / MBOs, etc.), and changes in legislation, etc.

One of the major constraints emphasized in the study include waste pickers' inability to negotiate with big generators of waste. This is because the workers are unable to deal with the process of giving quotations and bidding for recyclables. The study also points out that occupational health and safety problems increase workers' vulnerabilities. The major problems faced by waste pickers relate to contamination from biological and chemical hazardous waste, ergonomic problems, musculoskeletal problems, accidents, dog bites, injuries from sharp objects, fires caused by flammable liquids inside containers, and emotional vulnerability, among others.

There are two important theoretical lessons from the study. The first refers to how IEMS findings contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of the state and transformative modes of governance. The study showed not only how government grants might function as a cushion to fall back on in times of instability, but how the lack of such programmes adds layers of vulnerability to workers' lives. In addition, the study also revealed how the contexts of formally integrating workers into solid waste systems and the role government (at all levels) are fundamental factors for supporting waste pickers.

Second, the study also provides evidence that helps debunk some myths about informal workers and the waste picking sector more specifically. These myths are all related to various current theoretical debates on the organizing processes among informal workers, the informal sector, and solid waste management. The first myth is that waste pickers lack agency and are victims. The general lack of understanding of waste picking as an occupation often ignores the fact that waste pickers are capable of making choices and are important economic actors within SWM. The second myth is related to the idea that waste pickers are not (or cannot be) organized.

Until recently, waste pickers were invisible not only to city officers and waste specialists, but also to labour movements and social scientists. IEMS findings revealed how waste pickers develop work specializations and establish territories based on agreements they may make with shop owners or residents. While the process of forming MBOs is still recent worldwide, the study provides examples of cities where organizing is present and has taken on various formats: cooperatives, first- and third-level associations, and unions. Lastly, the findings help challenge the myth that modern waste management systems cannot include waste pickers. Waste specialists who subscribe to conventional paradigms of waste management often resort to the argument of waste picking as a feature of pre-modern systems. The vision of modern solid waste systems is therefore associated with mechanization, the use of capital-intensive technology, and of service provision by private companies. Findings claim that formally integrating waste pickers makes sense since in many areas of some of the studied cities, these workers are the ones who are already providing the only collection of household refuse.

As argued earlier, the meaning of integration varies depending on the country / city contexts, but it also depends on the perspective of various actors – engineers, social scientists, and activists – who are bound to produce different meanings when speaking about integration. The IEMS found two main modes of integration: integration as recognition, which includes measures that facilitate access to mixed waste, registration, and assistance to families; and formal integration, considered a means of introducing waste pickers in either refuse collection and / or resource recovery within source segregation schemes with payments of waste pickers through contracts or subsidies. The latter would guarantee waste pickers a type of semi-formal status through formal agreements.

Policy Implications

One general policy lesson from this study is that waste pickers are vital players in the world economy by contributing to improving public health, reducing the costs associated with municipal solid waste management, and significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the environment.

It is important to recognize then that government policies play an important role. Governments can catalyze processes by helping waste pickers form associations and / or cooperatives, opening

dialogue channels with informal workers within government institutions, and also encouraging other organizations to do so by establishing multi-stakeholders platforms for participatory planning and by giving incentives to cooperatives / associations and micro-enterprises so they can enter new niches.

Governments can also implement processes of formal integration by devising a system whereby waste pickers are allowed access to recyclables by formalizing partnerships with waste pickers' MBOs through MOUs or other formal agreements; providing infrastructure for sorting, and baling, etc.; carrying out educational campaigns to help not only change the biases the general public holds towards informal workers, but also to encourage more segregation of recyclables; and finally, offering, on a regular basis, capacity building and management courses.

The study also suggests the importance of a holistic and comprehensive approach to formal integration both for MBOs and governments. Waste pickers' organizations and governments alike should be attentive to the fact that a holistic approach is necessary along with a thorough assessment of what formal integration might bring as challenges for both sides. For MBOs, for instance, there will be pressure for the professionalization of services provided by workers. In this sense, there might be a need for MBOs and their allies to professionally seek experts who have recognized technical expertise in order to train them. On the other hand, city governments should realize that the process of integrating waste pickers is a long-term commitment.

Lastly, the research findings clearly indicated that MBOs are fundamental actors for waste pickers. They are relevant for building self-esteem and for the representation of workers' interests with government and market actors. They are relevant for training and qualification of waste pickers as both service providers and political actors. They are also relevant in contexts where progressive legislation has been passed so that they can oversee whether legislation is being implemented and / or assess unexpected outcomes from this legislation. In this sense, waste pickers' organizations fulfill social, political, and cultural functions. It goes without saying that in order to better fulfill their roles, MBOs should always be attentive to the importance of strengthening internal democracy and the flow of communication among members, which includes sharing information on relevant research for the sector.

