

## Executive Summary

### Waste Pickers in Nakuru, Kenya

Recent statistics show the majority of workers in developing countries earn their livelihoods in the informal economy. Studies on the informal economy have provided theories to explain the persistence, characteristics and growth of informal employment. However, few have evaluated the grounded realities of work in the informal economy, and none have done so over time and across a sufficiently large number of sectors and cities. The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) is a qualitative and quantitative study designed to evaluate the reality of these workers' lives. With research conducted over three years in 10 cities, the IEMS aims to provide credible, grounded evidence of the range of driving forces, both positive and negative, that affect conditions of work in the informal economy over time. Informal workers and their membership-based organizations (MBOs) are at the centre of the analysis.

#### *The Research on Waste Pickers in Nakuru*

In Nakuru, the IEMS research was carried out with 163 waste pickers. Two variables were used to select the sample: 1) sex; and 2) source of materials – whether the waste pickers collected in Nakuru's only dumpsite, Gioto, or outside the dumpsite, mainly within the business and residential areas south of the Nairobi–Nakuru–Eldoret highway. The sample, drawn primarily from all waste picker organizations operating in these areas, consisted of 47 per cent men and 53 per cent women respondents.

Focus groups were conducted between August–September 2012 with 75 waste pickers taking part in this qualitative research. The quantitative component

of the study entailed a survey questionnaire administered to the 75 focus group participants plus another 88 waste pickers who were also members of the nascent but growing MBO, for a total of 163 participants. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with knowledgeable officials and those involved with the waste pickers' movement as a means of further exploring issues that arose from the study.

The waste pickers both at and outside the dumpsite collect a wide range of products – food, metal, plastic items, PET bottles, clothing, shoes, glass, and paper – and sell the material to earn their livelihood.



## Findings

Over 90 per cent of waste picker respondents' households depend on the informal sector for their livelihood. Almost 80 per cent of survey participants said their own efforts sustained the household, while most others relied on the informal activities of other household members. The average household size, consistent with the Nakuru District average, is 3.6 with, on average, one working person supporting two dependants. Only six of the 163 respondents said their household could rely on formal sector wage employment. It was more common for male waste pickers to say they were the main providers for their families, while female waste pickers sometimes were supplementing the household income. Generally, the waste pickers had no access to other types of income (such as pension or social assistance), and a very small proportion of them received limited remittances.

Most waste pickers in Nakuru are independent, self-employed own account workers. In a few cases, waste pickers are members of cooperatives, indicating that there is a small level of group organization.

The amount of total sales of material (turnover) varies across waste pickers both by sex and the source of their materials. Men had higher turnovers on average compared to women irrespective of location of waste collection. However, all waste pickers subsist on meager returns. The average mean monthly turnover – before accounting for any expenses incurred, such as storage or transportation – was under Kshs. 5,000, or less than US \$2/day.

A majority reported that their incomes had fallen in the previous 12 months. Asked to evaluate their expectations over the next year, survey respondents painted a gloomy picture. Most waste pickers expected less access to waste, less material collected and less revenue for their efforts in the coming year. A smaller proportion expected the same factors to improve, but almost all agreed competition will increase as more people enter the sector.

Waste pickers in Nakuru are not highly educated; slightly over half of the waste pickers have at most primary education, and very few have attained any tertiary education, suggesting there are few other employment options available to these workers.

## Value Chain Dynamics

Participants evaluated the driving forces that impact their work. For Nakuru's waste pickers, the value chain, especially low and fluctuating prices, was the most important negative driving force. (Ironically, the value chain was also cited as the most important *positive* driving force for waste pickers, with availability of materials being the most significant factor.) The prices offered by the buyers for their products are affected by macroeconomic conditions such as shifting prices for recyclables in the formal economy that are closely linked to movements in prices in the commodities markets. Other difficulties

named that relate to value chain dynamics include inadequate availability of materials, exploitation by buyers, too few buyers, competition from other waste pickers, and lack of market information. Through this study, we find that value chain factors are constrained by current urban policies.

Businesses, which waste pickers identified as the most important institutional actors, provide materials but also sometimes were reported to unjustifiably limit waste pickers' access to waste materials. Other businesses and organizations bought materials – including artists and youth groups. However, the most common buyers, the middlemen who sold the recovered materials on to formal recyclers, were often reported to engage in unfair trade practices such as through the use of faulty weighing scales or, through cartels, to force the waste pickers to sell at unfairly low prices.

## Working Conditions

The second-most negative driving force identified was unfavourable health, safety, and working conditions. Waste pickers described their workplace as dangerous, foul, smoky and toxic. Participants noted that they had been burned by chemicals, and that they need protective gear. One particularly worrying issue was the dumping of medical waste at Gioto. Waste pickers frequently encountered syringes, blood, cotton pads, and medicines. According to men from the dumpsite, the dumping of medical waste at Gioto results in loss of property, air pollution, disease and even death.

Harassment and discrimination by society were also identified as key issues affecting the waste pickers. Research participants became emotional at their treatment by the public. As one woman in a focus group explained, "People see us and just begin laughing as if we are mad people! We are really discouraged and humiliated."

## City/Government Policies & Practices

The research participants prioritized a number of different negative forces related to government policy and practices at the city and national level. These included: harassment by the municipality; poor service delivery and infrastructure; municipal waste management policy and national government.

Scrutiny of the regulations shows that waste pickers are not recognized as workers and their needs not addressed. The findings from this study, for example the perpetual harassment of waste pickers, strongly suggest that rules governing waste picking in Nakuru are generally inappropriate. It is also apparent that the importance of and rights of waste pickers are seldom recognized in Nakuru. The municipality, like businesses, provides and limits access to waste both at the Gioto dumpsite and throughout the Nakuru town. But the municipality was also identified as engaging in gratuitous violence through excessive harassment of waste pickers.



A close examination of the policy framework revealed a worrying focus on private collection and a failure to recognize the role of waste pickers in waste management.

Furthermore, infrastructure and institutional obstacles were identified as occupational problems affecting the safety of waste pickers. Poor access to small business support, poor access to infrastructure and the cost of infrastructure were highlighted. Harassment and discrimination by society was also raised as an issue.

### **Recommendations**

The waste pickers, researchers and MBO experts together propose the following recommendations to address the most pressing issues identified in the study:

#### **Recognition and Respect**

Waste pickers in the study were asked to propose how institutions and actors could help them. Virtually all their proposals revolved around promoting and securing the rights and dignity of waste pickers. For instance, they asked that the municipality stop the harassment and instead collaborate with waste pickers. Similar demands were made of the police, and rich people were urged to behave humanely and respectfully toward this vulnerable group. Highlighting the divisions that exist between waste pickers, older (and particularly female) waste pickers emphasized the need for young, male waste pickers to stop harassing and dominating them.

#### **Value Chain**

The majority of waste pickers in Nakuru sell their materials to informal businesses and workers in highly exploitative relationships. To ensure that waste pickers earn a fairer distribution of profits in the recycling value chain it is proposed that:

- As in Pune, India, the municipality establish municipally run buy-back centres that purchase materials at a fair price.
- Waste pickers should be encouraged and supported to form cooperatives that can secure contracts to sell materials collectively in order to obtain higher prices.
- As in Bogota, Colombia and Diadema, Brazil, the municipality should pay waste pickers a set fee per kilogram of recyclables collected as remuneration for the environmental service they provide to the city by diverting recyclables from the landfill. Such payment is fair compensation for a key service, and helps to provide income security and to protect the waste pickers from the vagaries of the market.

#### **Municipal Waste Management Policy**

- The municipality must recognize waste pickers as a legitimate part of the waste management system.



Photo: P. Alburu

- Bylaws should be amended and developed in order to ensure that waste pickers have access to recyclables and are not harassed while performing their work.
- The municipality should engage with the national police force to ensure police do not harass and victimize waste pickers.
- The municipality should develop an inclusive solid waste management system. Waste pickers must be remunerated for this service in addition to earning an income from selling the materials they collect.
- Waste pickers will need to be consulted and involved in the development and implementation of policies and systems.
- The municipality should hire staff with expertise in integrated waste management and social mobilization around waste issues.
- The municipality should run awareness campaigns with residents to educate them on the important role played by waste pickers and instruct them how to correctly separate their materials.
- The municipality should develop a forum where municipal officials, waste pickers, residents and other actors in the waste management and recycling sectors can engage to develop and oversee the implementation of inclusive waste management policy.

#### **Health and Safety**

Waste pickers working at both the dumpsite and on the streets labour in extremely hazardous and unhealthy environments. In cities such as Belo Horizonte, Brazil, it has been demonstrated that a long-term solution to health and safety concerns lies in an integrated solid waste management system in which waste pickers collect recyclables that have been

sorted by residents, then collected and sorted/stored in safe, hygienic warehouses.

The recommendations listed here to address waste pickers' health and safety issues should be seen as the first stage in a comprehensive programme to move waste pickers off of the dumpsite and out of itinerant picking, and into integrated source segregation programmes. Waste pickers will need to be consulted and involved in the development and implementation of these policies and programmes.

- The municipality should develop a separation at source programme in which residents are required to separate recyclable and compostable material from waste.
- Waste pickers should be contracted by the municipality to collect the separated waste.
- In the interim, while waste pickers are still working on the dumpsite and as itinerant waste pickers in the streets, the municipality should create designated areas within the dumpsite for the salvaging and sorting of materials.
- The municipality should also provide waste pickers working on the landfill and in the streets with health and safety training and equipment.
- The municipality must ensure, with immediate effect, that no hospital waste is sent to the landfill.

#### **Social Policy**

- The municipality should ensure that all waste pickers receive official government identification and all benefits to which they are entitled.

#### **Mobilization of Waste Pickers**

All of the above initiatives require the active involvement of waste pickers. As waste pickers have only recently begun to organize in Nakuru and their



Photo: P. Mburu

organizations are still small and weak, it is of pressing priority that waste pickers in Nakuru receive support to develop strong, democratic MBOs.

- The Nakuru Waste Pickers' Association (NAWPA) and the Kenya National Association of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT) should work together to provide organizing support to waste pickers in Nakuru.
- As in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, the municipality can also play a key role in strengthening organizing of waste pickers by making resources available, and by hiring staff with knowledge and expertise who can work with waste pickers and assist them in organizing.



**Nakuru  
Waste Pickers'  
Association  
(NAWPA)**



**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.

To read the full city, sector and global reports, visit [inclusivecities.org/iems](http://inclusivecities.org/iems)