

## Nakuru's Waste Pickers: Realities & Recommendations

Informal workers make important contributions to their cities. The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) is evaluating the realities that informal workers face, the forces that affect them, and their contributions to the urban economy. In Nakuru, 75 waste pickers participated in focus group discussions and a survey was administered to 143 vendors.<sup>1</sup> The findings are summarized in this report and were used to develop relevant **policy recommendations** that appear on the last page.

### Characteristics & Driving Forces

Waste pickers collect a wide range of reusable materials: food, metal, plastic items, PET bottles, clothing, shoes, glass and paper. They sell the materials informally to earn their livelihoods. They keep some material for themselves, and also use reclaimed materials to make products they sell informally.

#### Informal work is essential to their livelihoods and their families' survival.

- 9 out of 10 surveyed waste pickers said informal work is the main source of income for their household; 80% were the main breadwinner in their household. This was especially true for men.
- Only 3% of waste pickers' households relied on income from formal employment.
- Waste pickers have no social assistance, pension or other income; only about 6% receive remittances.

*"Providing for basic needs such as food and clothes is problematic."*

#### Waste pickers struggle for survival – and their returns are diminishing.

Waste pickers subsist on meager returns. The average mean monthly total sales of material – before accounting for expenses such as storage or transportation – was under Kshs. 5,000 (< US \$2/day). Men had higher total sales than women.

*"There is so much borrowing to be able to survive."*

62% said revenue had fallen in the preceding year. Respondents saw a gloomy future with less material to collect due to increased privatization and increased competition.

#### Waste pickers in Nakuru have little education and few employment options.



#### Low and fluctuating prices, lack of access to material and the exploitative practices of buyers significantly impact livelihoods.

4 in every 5 waste pickers described large variations in income, low profits and too many competitors.

Some buyers were reported to engage in cartels, use faulty weighing scales, or force waste pickers to sell at unfairly low prices.

#### Waste pickers described their workplace as dangerous, foul, smoky and toxic.

- 77% identified health and safety concerns as a big problem. Participants have been burned, injured and exposed to toxic chemicals.
- The dumping of medical waste at Gioto is particularly unsafe. Waste pickers encounter syringes, blood, cotton pads and medicines. According to men from the dumpsite, this medical waste leads to loss of property, disease and even death.

*"When you are infected by some of this waste, you die."*

#### Local government policies and practices harm waste pickers.

Major problem areas are discussed in detail on the next pages.

<sup>1</sup> The sample consisted of 86 women and 77 men; waste pickers were categorized by whether they work at Nakuru's Gioto dumpsite or outside the dumpsite. All participants are members of the Nakuru Waste Pickers' Association (NAWPA), a nascent membership-based organization. See **About IEMS and the Nakuru Research Partners** on page 3. Quotations used throughout this material are taken from focus groups held as part of this research.

## Linkages & Contributions

The IEMS made clear that the informal and formal economies in Nakuru intersect, and that waste pickers make significant contributions in both arenas.

**Waste pickers' major clients are buyers – and most buyers are licensed by the city.**

*“When we sell, we start a chain of revenue generation and collection from the buyers all the way to manufacturers.”*

**Waste pickers provide affordable materials to a range of enterprises and individuals.**

In addition to selling into the recycling value chain, waste pickers sell materials to a wide range of formal and informal industries including the building, farming, arts and design, and furniture industries.

*“We sell egg shells, and bottle tops, bones, and cans to artists and designers. Nails, metals, and bolts we sell to Mama Muthoni...”*

*“We sell to Eveready Batteries the old newspapers. To Pamoja Youth Group we sell plastics and bottles ... to package the liquid soap they make.”*

**Waste picking provides employment and livelihood opportunities, combatting poverty and crime.**

*“We keep the youth busy and sustain and provide their livelihoods.”*

*“These days even those who have not gone to school, they can get employed. We ... are employed and employ others.”*

**Waste picking helps prevent disease and improves the overall environment.**

*“We keep the drains clean. We now have a clean environment in Manyani.”*

**Waste pickers' efforts clean up and beautify the town.**



Women waste pickers recounted how they collect materials from housing estates, bars, streets, offices, schools, drains, garbage collection points and hotels.

**By collecting waste and diverting material from Nakuru's dumpsite, waste pickers offer a free public service.**

*“We make life affordable in the slums and estates. We clean these places. We educate the people of the estates; we also clean Nakuru.”*

**Despite their contributions, waste pickers are treated badly in society.**

Only one third of waste pickers felt their labours were appreciated by the public.

*“People see us and just begin laughing as if we are mad people! We are really discouraged and humiliated.”*

A number commented on how they are seen not as service providers but as thieves.

## Perceptions & Relations with Governments

Scrutiny of the regulations revealed that waste pickers are not recognized as workers and their needs are not addressed.

### Waste pickers had three major areas of complaint relating to the municipality:

- perpetual harassment
- poor service delivery and infrastructure
- municipal waste management policy

*“Paying bribes is inevitable. That is the way you can stay working. You have got to oil the system!”*

### Harassment by municipal officials and national police is an acute problem.

*You’ll be arrested, charged high fines and if you cannot pay and sometimes even when you pay the fines, you are imprisoned.”*

### The municipality was also identified as engaging in gratuitous violence.

*“You are also mercilessly beaten up.”*

### Waste pickers need more business services and institutional support.

- 53% said a lack of access to small business support centres was a problem.
- 41% said they can’t obtain a business licence.
- Inadequate business and storage space was an issue.
- Poor treatment by local authorities was identified, again, as an institutional shortcoming.

### Waste pickers are acutely aware of infrastructure and amenities shortcomings.

- 51% identified poor access to infrastructure (electricity, water, lights) as a problem
- 51% also said the cost of amenities like electricity, water, and telephone were too high

### A shift toward privatization in the municipal waste management policy is threatening Nakuru’s waste pickers.

- almost 72% of the waste pickers said waste services have become more privatized in recent years
- 66% believe waste services will become more privatized in the next 2 years.

Privatization takes livelihoods away from those who have traditionally made their living gathering material others have cast aside.

## About This IEMS Research

These findings are based on research conducted in 2012 as part of the Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS), a project under Inclusive Cities. Conducted over three years in 10 cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the study is examining how informal livelihoods are changing, how informal workers respond to these changes, and what institutions help or hinder their lives. Informal workers and their membership-based organizations (MBOs) are at the centre of the analysis. The project is led by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). In Nakuru, WIEGO partnered with the newly forming Nakuru Waste Pickers’ Association (NAWPA), which is affiliated with the Kenya National Alliance of Street Vendors and Informal Traders (KENASVIT).

## About NAWPA

KENASVIT, a network of informal traders and street vendors, started supporting waste pickers in 2010 with a workshop that brought together various stakeholders in order for them to form a national umbrella organization like KENASVIT. The waste pickers’ MBO is the newly forming Nakuru Waste Pickers’ Association (NAWPA), which consists of community-based organizations or self help groups (SHG). Participants in this study belonged to Bondeni Waste Pickers Self Help Group, Murogi Youth Group, Taka Ni Mali Pickers SHG, Gioto Waste Pickers SHG, and Victory Waste Pickers.

## About 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. For more information see [www.inclusivecities.org](http://www.inclusivecities.org).

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



## Policy Recommendations

The waste pickers, researchers and experts involved in the IEMS together propose the following recommendations to address the most pressing issues that Nakuru's waste pickers face.

### Value Chain

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

- the municipality establish municipally run buy-back centres that purchase materials at a fair price
- waste pickers be encouraged and supported to form cooperatives which can secure contracts to sell materials collectively in order to obtain higher prices
- the municipality pay waste pickers a set fee per kilogram of recyclables collected as remuneration for the environmental service they provide in diverting recyclables from the landfill and offers stable income despite fluctuating markets

### Municipal Waste Management Policy

The municipal government should:

- recognize waste pickers as a legitimate part of the waste management system
- involve waste pickers in developing and implementing policies and systems
- amend by-laws to ensure waste pickers have access to recyclables and are not harassed while working
- engage with the national police force to prevent harassment of waste pickers
- remunerate waste pickers for their important service to the municipality (as well as continuing to allow them to earn from selling materials)
- issue official government identification to waste pickers, who should receive all benefits to which they are entitled
- hire staff with expertise in integrated waste management and social mobilization around waste issues
- run awareness campaigns for residents to educate them on waste pickers' importance and instruct them on separating their materials
- develop a forum where municipal officials, waste pickers, residents and other actors in waste management and recycling develop and oversee implementation of inclusive waste management policy



### Health and Safety

Waste pickers working at both the dumpsite and on the streets are exposed to extreme hazards. In other cities, 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. Waste pickers must be involved in creating 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 and take it to sort/store in safe, hygienic warehouses.

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 salvaging and sorting materials
- provide waste pickers working at Gioto and in the streets with health and safety training and equipment
- ensure, with immediate effect, that no hospital waste is sent to the dumpsite

### Mobilization of Waste Pickers

Organization of waste pickers in Nakuru is crucial to ensure their effective involvement in developing policies and systems. The municipality can play a key role by making resources available, and by hiring knowledgeable staff to work with waste pickers, assisting them in building strong, democratic organizations.