

Pune's Waste Pickers: Realities & Recommendations

Waste pickers, like other 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 Pune, India, 73 waste pickers participated in focus group discussions and a survey was administered to 150 waste pickers.¹ The findings are summarized in this report and were used to develop relevant **policy recommendations** that appear on the last page.

Characteristics & Driving Forces

The informal waste sector offers employment opportunities to illiterate, socially excluded, jobless workers.

- Waste picking in Pune is confined primarily to the Scheduled Castes.
- A disproportionately large number of women do this work.
- Levels of illiteracy are high – only about 1% of adults have completed secondary school.

Informal waste work in Pune consists of different categories of workers who have distinct sources of income, thus face different challenges.

The IEMS research involved three categories:

- **Itinerant waste pickers** recover recyclables from the street and dump sites on the street, and from businesses but not from residences. They earn revenue only from the sale of recyclables.
- **Fixed waste collectors** are integrated into door to door collection as members of the cooperative SWaCH. They gather co-mingled or segregated organic and recyclable waste. They receive payment from households and from the recyclables they sell.
- **Itinerant waste buyers** purchase recyclables from the collectors and waste pickers and earn income from re-selling the recyclables up the chain.

Overall, 85% of survey respondents were the main income earners in their households, while more than 95% of their households depend on the informal economy for survival.

- Men have higher turnovers than women.²
- Fixed collectors enjoy higher turnovers than other types of women waste pickers and more stable earnings.



Waste picking is a necessary livelihood in Pune—but one that most workers feel is threatened. Photo: J. Luckham

Waste pickers in Pune face increasing struggles to earn a living.

- 47% of survey respondents said revenues had fallen over the previous year. Most coped by cutting down on personal expenses and borrowing.
- The rising cost of living and the proliferation of waste pickers, including through migration, were the most cited problems affecting all waste pickers.

People are doing this out of destitution. If everything is going well for a person, why should he do this work? It's those whose hearth is cold because there's nothing to cook who are joining.

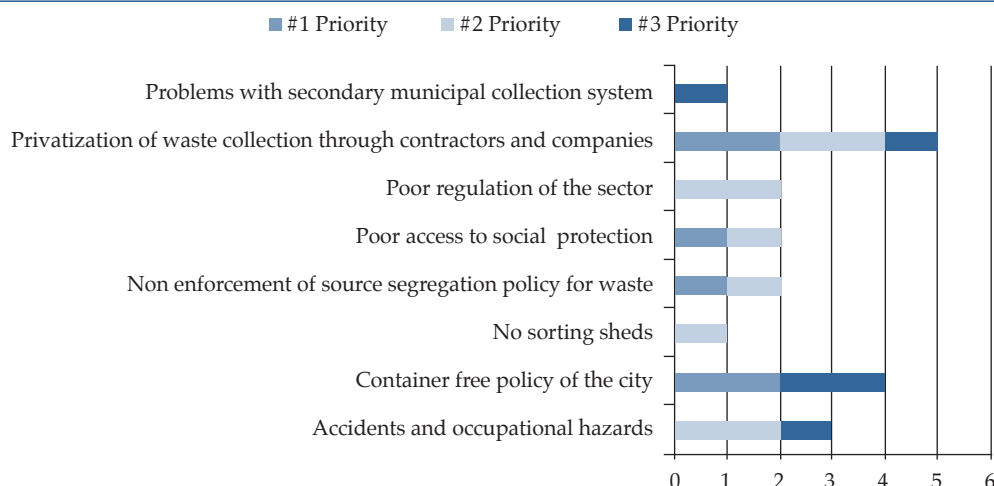
- 70% said instability in the price of recyclables was a problem because they lose earnings when the market drops.
- The absence of social protection in the context of rising costs of living was a common concern.

The price of everything that we buy increases and the price of recyclables comes down! It's difficult to even buy a rupees 50 sari or school supplies.

¹ See Note on Sampling & Methodology, page 2, and About IEMS and the Pune research partners, box on page 3.

² The study captured the total turnover for waste pickers in each category but not incomes, as it did not consider all input costs related to earnings.

Negative Factors Relating to Government Policy, Practices & Planning at the City Level



Waste pickers all perceive a threat to their access to recyclables and thus to their livelihoods.

- Private companies contracted to collect waste and large companies interested in recycling are threats affecting fixed waste collectors most.
- Removal of municipal skips for “beautification” affects itinerant waste pickers most.
- The proliferation of scrap dealers threatens itinerant waste buyers by eroding their “trade knowledge” and encouraging residents and businesses to bypass itinerant waste buyers and sell directly to the dealer.

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?

Relations with Governments

Relations with local officials were cited as both negative and positive.

Fixed waste collectors appreciate the provision of push carts, safety equipment and storage/sorting facilities by the city – yet only 23% reported city officials helped them. Most complained of being admonished, fined or having to pay municipal workers inappropriately. Others said inadequate service by the municipality confounds their work.

Itinerant waste pickers said they were blamed and fined for littering around the municipal skips.

We get fined rupees 500 if we don't sort the waste properly ... My cart was confiscated by the municipal supervisor but the residents apologized so he released it...

A lack of allocated space is a problem.

- Materials are lost or degraded during the monsoons due to lack of sheltered storage.
- Waste pickers face health issues when they have to dump and sort waste in or near their homes.

Provision of medical insurance is highly valued.

- Data from KKPKP showed 14% of members had benefitted from a medical insurance scheme in which the municipality paid the premium.
- Employees of the municipal government in waste-related work get full medical coverage; informal waste workers do not.

Connection with the MBO

Belonging to a membership-based organization, in this case a trade union, offers benefits:

- life insurance, medical benefits and support for children's education
- facilitation of a consultative process for resolving issues related to private waste management companies
- advocacy on larger issues such as food security and universalization of old age pension

Note on Sampling & Methodology:

The IEMS used qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative component captured perceptions of informal workers in their own words through 15 focus groups involving 73 waste pickers in Pune, India. The quantitative component consisted of a survey administered to focus group participants plus another 77 workers for a total of 150. The sampling approach was designed to maintain comparability across the cities/sectors while allowing flexibility to meet local circumstances. Where the MBO maintains a registry of members, a stratified random sample was developed that was statistically representative of the MBO population. In

cities with no accurate registry, the city team used a quota sampling approach. Local researchers worked with the MBO to identify the best possible sample. In Pune, the IEMS sample was drawn from the membership database of KKPKP; 93 of the 150 participants were women (women account for more than 70% of KKPKP membership). The variables used were sex and source of materials. See About IEMS and the Pune research partners on page 3.

Quotations used throughout this material are taken from focus groups held as part of this research.

Linkages & Contributions

Waste pickers are closely linked to the formal economy.

82% source materials primarily from private households, 88% from the “general public”, 93% from formal businesses.

The entire recycling industry depends on us. However they are not ensuring their profits reach us in equal measure.

All informal waste workers offer benefits to the city.

- They remove waste from residents/businesses at low or no cost to the municipality.
- Fixed waste collectors gather organic waste for composting and use on public grounds or for municipally-contracted bio-methanation waste-to-energy plants.
- Itinerant waste buyers prevent junk and better quality recyclables from entering the municipal waste stream.
- Itinerant waste pickers recover recyclables from municipal skips, transfer stations and streets, reducing the amount of waste handled by the municipal waste collection system.

Waste pickers take pride in helping to clean the city.

The majority of fixed waste collectors (73%) and itinerant waste buyers (68%) believe the general public recognizes and appreciates their services;



though only 40% of the itinerant waste pickers believed this was true.

Regardless of their contributions, many waste pickers said they face hostility, ill treatment and danger.

Occupational health and safety was identified as a problem by three-quarters of all waste pickers, and by almost all itinerant waste pickers.

The city gets healthier, but we get sicker. Big needles, glass, rose thorns, all those things injure us.

About IEMS

These findings are based on research conducted in 2012 as part of the Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS), a project under Inclusive Cities. Conducted in 10 cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the study examines 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 Pune, WIEGO partnered with Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) and SWaCH. **See page 2 for information on the sample and methodology.**

About KKPKP and SWaCH

KKPKP is a waste pickers' trade union with over 9,200 members. SWaCH is a workers' cooperative, owned by waste pickers, that provides door to door collection and other services.

About WIEGO

WIEGO is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base, and influencing local, national and international policies.

About Inclusive Cities

Launched in 2008, the Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen 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.

To read IEMS city, sector and global reports, visit inclusivecities.org or wiego.org.

Policy & Advocacy Recommendations

National/State Social Security and Welfare Policy

Create a universal, state-funded non-contributory social security floor to address vulnerability of informal waste pickers – This should include subsidized food rations; medical care; disability / death insurance; maternity benefits and early childhood care; and old age pension, disability and destitution pension / allowance.

Use occupation as a criterion for rights-based entitlements – Certification of caste is stringently monitored and often recorded during passage through formal education channels. Most waste pickers have been outside the formal education system and are 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.

City/State Policy

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.

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

Labour Policy

Explore processes for registration and decent work for all waste pickers – While some informal workers are protected by labour legislation, there is no set process for registration of informal workers not covered. The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, enacted in 2008, is ineffective. A national policy or Act should be explored.



Create enabling conditions for occupational health and safety for waste pickers – Better working conditions and worker benefits are required.

Promote upskilling, infrastructure, and credit for waste and recycling enterprises – 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. Infrastructure and credit can help them diversify into other services / industries.

Promote organization of waste pickers – The study finds the organization of waste pickers in Pune has brought significant gains. Greater efforts to organize waste pickers are required, especially as privatization increases the vulnerability of waste pickers.

Energy, Industrial and Commerce Policy

Recognize the legitimacy and vibrancy of the recycling sector as a legitimate commodities market – The robust, market-driven informal waste collection / recycling sector is absent in policy documents. The private-public partnership policy of the government currently 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.

Provide incentives for informal trade and processing of secondary commodities – Secondary commodities are a boon to formal manufacturing industries because they avoid extraction costs of virgin materials and lower manufacturing costs. Informal waste pickers produce 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 better, safer and more remunerative options for workers would have social benefits and could increase employment.