



WIEGO's POSITION on DUMP CLOSURES

This position paper is authored by Sonia M. Dias, Waste Specialist for WIEGO, and based on her 30 years of experience in Latin America, Asia and Africa, and in WIEGO's grounded experience with waste pickers globally.

Livelihood plans must be an integral component of any dump closure process.

Waste pickers around the globe contribute to a cleaner environment, healthier cities and lower municipal budgets. These vital informal workers (and their families) depend on the availability of recyclable materials to earn income. Open dumps pose environmental and health concerns, but any dump closure must include a comprehensive and articulated approach that addresses the impacts on waste pickers.

WIEGO recommends that moving from open dumps into sanitary landfills be part of an integrated and sustainable solid waste framework with an emphasis on waste minimization, reuse and reduce strategies ("zero waste"), and on final disposal based on environmentally-friendly technologies suited for local contexts and the composition of waste.

This approach must address the protection of livelihoods.

The Issue & The People It Impacts

Millions of people worldwide – a large number of them women – make a living collecting, sorting, reusing and selling valuable recyclable materials that someone else has thrown away. In many countries, they supply the only form of solid waste collection.

Around the globe, forward-thinking governments are pushing a green waste agenda that calls for using more recycled materials and fewer virgin materials. A great number and range of international studies have found that recycling uses less energy, creates fewer greenhouse gas emissions¹ and protects natural resources. Also, recycling creates 1/25th the emissions caused by incineration.²

Informal waste pickers play a vital role in recycling by reclaiming millions of tonnes of material that would otherwise end up in the streets, countryside and oceans—or at best, in a landfill. But landfills are expensive and have limited space. According to UNHabitat,³ high rates of recovery (50-80%) in some cities are due to informal recyclers' work and are a "positive externality which the municipality enjoys without having to pay for it because the environmental gain is a by-product of the economic interests of informal recyclers."

¹ Turner, David A., Ian D. Williams and Simon Kemp. 2015. "Greenhouse Gas Emission Factors for Recycling of Source-Segregated Waste Materials." *Resources, Conservation and Recycling*, Volume 105, Part A, December, pp. 186-197.

² Tellus Institute. 2008. "Assessment of Materials Management Options for the Massachusetts Solid Waste Master Plan Review": p. 2.

³ UNHabitat. 2010. *Solid Waste Management in the World's Cities: Water and Sanitation in the World's Cities 2010*.

Yet waste pickers typically earn little for their work and often face deplorable living and working conditions and low social status. They are rarely supported and often harassed by local authorities and are exploited by the middlemen who buy their materials. Increasingly, waste picker livelihoods are also threatened by “modernized” approaches (e.g. incineration).

Open Dumps

While sanitary landfills are engineered to protect the environment and human health, open dumps allow for unsupervised deposit of waste, which is burned or buried. Open dumps adversely affect the environment by causing soil, air and water contamination, while endangering human health.⁴ Every year there are numerous reports of fires, landslides, vehicle-worker accidents and other incidents at dumps in developing countries. These result in the loss of countless lives.

As environmental and climate change issues become more urgent, the pressure to close open dumps will increase worldwide.

While closing open dumps is important for environmental, health and ethical reasons, the social impacts on the livelihoods of the working poor must be assessed and addressed. Thus, livelihood plans should be an integral component of any dump closure process.

The needs and demands of waste pickers are shaped by local contexts. However, based on WIEGO’s experience of the grounded reality of waste pickers,⁵ it is possible to offer the principles and guidelines that follow.

PRINCIPLES TO SUPPORT WASTE PICKER LIVELIHOODS

CORE PRINCIPLE

Any change to the way solid waste is managed—whether upgrading from dumps to controlled landfills, introducing recycling schemes or “modernizing” a system—must begin with a comprehensive plan that considers the needs of the informal workers who are already engaged in gathering, sorting and recycling waste. Any suppressed activity should be replaced with another *of at least equal value* to waste pickers. And waste pickers must be involved *as equal partners* in all phases of planning and implementation.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES

Build on existing solid waste systems/recycling systems by including waste pickers. This requires adequate research into livelihood impacts on informal waste workers. A comprehensive approach has to address the multi-dimensionality of the occupation.

Broad consultation and ongoing participation is essential. Waste picker representatives should be engaged as full partners. Multi-stakeholders’ forums/platforms have proven effective to allow dialogue between governments, informal worker organizations and other key stakeholders.

⁴ Ibid: pp. 214-15.

⁵ WIEGO is documenting the closure of Brasília dumpsite in Brazil and is part of a monitoring committee that is assessing social and environmental impacts of this closure. In Dakar, Senegal, WIEGO is closely following the threat to close Mbeubess dumpsite.

National solid waste policies should mandate livelihood plans to address waste pickers needs. Funding mechanisms must ensure that livelihood protection plans are implemented.

Municipal solid waste systems should address and ensure waste picker livelihoods are protected through comprehensive plans that include as many waste pickers as possible, and these elements:

- proper contracts with payment for service collection and sorting services
- improved basic working conditions
- occupational and health programmes to address the risks that waste pickers face
- options for employment and income generation that respect waste pickers' right to work
- restructuring of the recycling value chain to ensure equitable distribution of profits, empowering waste pickers and improving both their position in the chain and their earnings (examples: floor prices; payment for environmental services rendered by waste pickers)
- infrastructure for sorting/processing of recyclables
- financing/credit for waste picker organizations (e.g. collectives) for equipment (scales, shredders, etc.) as well as micro-financing schemes
- capacity building for waste picker organizations to enable them to increase efficiency and enter new niches to compete in the market; training in business management, cooperativism principles, and processing or semi-processing of recyclables
- social protection schemes to address specific needs of waste pickers
- improved housing and living conditions for waste pickers
- eradication of child labour in waste picking (solutions could involve incentives such as cash benefits/grants to help parents keep kids in school; child care facilities close to the workplace/home)
- changes to the legal framework/municipal legislation to support recognition and the integration of waste pickers.

Integration must take into account ownership and the empowerment of waste pickers.

An incremental approach that moves first to a controlled dump, rather than a restricted sanitary landfill, can be implemented. This approach, however, requires a clear, articulated vision of the future for the occupation. This may mean adopting relatively simple, inexpensive measures such as recognizing and upgrading dumps by designating safe places for selection and/or organizing schedules. But this should be the first rung on a ladder of organization, empowerment and economic improvement, and address public and occupational health as well as environmental concerns.

ABOUT WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global action-policy-research network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy.

Find us at www.wiego.org.

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