

# Livelihoods of Waste-Pickers across the Global South

## An Analysis of Assets and Vulnerabilities

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## 01

### Introduction

Waste management is a vital public service. In the global South, it is largely performed by an undervalued and neglected army of informal waste pickers.



## 02

### Objective

Here, I provide an analysis of waste-pickers' livelihoods based on their following assets and vulnerabilities: human, financial, natural, physical, social, and political.



## 03

### Methodology

I conducted extensive secondary research by way of a literature review. I then used the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) to categorise my findings. First, I compiled region-specific profiles on waste-pickers. Second, I analysed their assets and vulnerabilities using SLF.

## 05

### Human

Human assets encompasses gender, age, literacy level, labour, skills, and past work experience. Human vulnerabilities include health related issues, socio-economic status, and hindered access to facilities (water, sanitation, education, and housing). Waste-picking is an occupation for vulnerable groups such as migrants, disabled people, and the unemployed, because it is not demanding in terms of initial training. However, low socio-economic status, lack of access to sanitation facilities, and poor housing deteriorates the health waste-pickers.

### Natural and Physical

The primary natural asset is garbage. Physical assets include protective equipment, carts, vehicles, bicycles, sacks, space for sorting, and their shelters. Limiting waste-pickers' access to garbage, sorting spaces, shelters, and from getting equipment are their primary natural and physical vulnerabilities. Notwithstanding the physical dangers of their job, government bodies and citizens are actively hostile towards them because of their occupation and its associated with garbage.

### Social and Political

Social assets are the relationships they use to sustain their livelihoods (their families, private firms, NGOs, co-operatives, middlemen, and other waste-pickers) while social vulnerabilities include stigma, discrimination, and conflict. These impede their access to waste (as a resource), quality education, adequate health care, affordable housing, access to public amenities, and basic respect from society. Political assets reflect their positions within current solid waste management systems. Their exclusion from this system and lack of recognition are political vulnerabilities. In such scenarios, cooperatives can be seen as extensions of waste-pickers' social and political empowerment as they aim to improve their livelihoods and reduce their exploitation.

### Financial

Waste-pickers' financial asset is their income. Debt, global trade of recyclables, and medical setbacks pose financial vulnerabilities. Trapped between poverty and a lack of benefits due to their informal work, waste-pickers are uncommonly disadvantaged. This has caused them to develop financial strategies such as collecting waste from high-income areas, collecting a range of waste categories to maximise their incomes, and make territorial agreements about areas to collect waste from.

## 04

### Profiles

Typical characteristics of informal waste-pickers include the following: low formal education levels, low income earning capacity, increased social exclusion, and high financial instability.

### South America

South America has between 0.5–4 million informal waste pickers. It was found that 67% of waste pickers were middle-aged women, with dependent children. 27% had never been to school and worked 5 hours a day, 6 days a week, for 15 years, earning \$8 USD per day.

### Africa

0.6% of the urban population in Africa are considered informal waste pickers. Data from Nigeria found that 95% of waste pickers were male. The mean daily income was found to be \$11 USD.

### India

In India, there are between 1.5–4 million informal waste pickers, where it was found that the gender distribution was somewhat balanced. On average, a waste picker worked 8–10 hours a day, during which they collected between 60–90 kgs of waste, and earned between \$1–\$2 USD per day.



## 06

### Conclusion

In the interest of environmental sustainability, social inclusion, and poverty alleviation, interventions are needed to improve the livelihoods of waste pickers and protect them from the vulnerabilities they face. As a vulnerable group, waste-pickers deserve to work in conditions that are economically stable, environmentally safe, and socially respected.

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