

Important but ignored?

The role of the informal recycling sector in a prospective international agreement on plastic pollution

Global plastic pollution as a pressing socio-environmental issue

The transboundary nature, scale and urgency of plastic pollution necessitates consideration of an international legally binding agreement that addresses the full lifecycle of plastics. Although knowledge and data gaps remain, the presence of leaked plastic waste and potentially harmful by-products (small particles, chemicals) has been documented across planetary spheres and geographies by the scientific community for more than a decade. The concerns revolve around multiple short- and long-term implications of plastic pollution on human and ecosystem health. At the current rate of plastic production and waste generation, mismanaged plastic waste is estimated to more than double by 2050.¹

Against the backdrop of mounting evidence and concern about the impacts of plastic pollution, the policy landscape is evolving rapidly. While multiple policies and regulations exist at the regional, national, and local levels,^{2,3} the international governance of plastics remains fragmented and uneven, with too little policy coherence at the global level.⁴ Effective governance of plastics is challenged by the diversity of sources of plastic pollution, the multiplicity of plastic materials and products, as well as by the range of uses, consumption patterns and end-of-life destinations. Stark differences in production, consumption and recycling rates also exist between and within developed and developing countries, which raise important questions of equity and distributive justice. Plastic pollution is a social-environmental issue that must thus be viewed as more than a mere technological or economic challenge.

HIGHLIGHTS

In science and policy discussions around a possible future international agreement on plastic pollution at the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2), it is important that the role of the informal recycling sector in contributing to plastic waste management is duly recognized.*

- The informal recycling sector constitutes an essential link in the plastics value chain and has great potential to improve end-of-life management.
- In developing and emerging economies, the sector significantly contributes to the recovery of plastics in strained municipal waste management systems.
- Despite their skills, knowledge and extensive waste management networks, informal recycling workers remain under-recognised for their contribution in preventing plastic pollution.
- Informal recycling workers and the sector should be duly recognized in the design, provisions and implementation of a prospective international agreement on plastic pollution.
- The prospective agreement should address the full lifecycle of plastics and be a legally binding instrument to ensure targeted and measurable implementation, compliance and monitoring mechanisms.

*Alternatively referred to as the Informal Waste Collection Sector, or Informal Plastic Recycling Sector

What is the informal recycling sector, and why is the sector important to tackle plastic pollution?

The informal recycling sector comprises all kinds of unregistered workers engaged in the collection, recovery, and recycling of waste. The sector is typically characterized by small-scale and unregulated recycling activities, providing a source of income for poor and marginalized workers. However, it is increasingly recognized as consisting of entrepreneurs and established micro-businesses that are highly skilled within their occupations.⁵ An important contributor to the circular economy, the informal recycling sector involves at least 15 million people globally, responsible for an estimated 58% of the collected and recycled plastic waste.^{6,7} The sector also saves significant costs for strained municipalities, which tend to lack resources to establish and maintain comprehensive formal waste management systems. However, knowledge of the scale and waste-handling capacity of the informal recycling sector remains limited. Data collection methodologies and efforts to include the sector have primarily considered waste pickers rather than holistically capturing the broader informal plastic recycling ecosystem. Persistent data gaps make it difficult to assess the flows of plastic waste handled by the sector, thus further hampering its due recognition

and inclusion in plastic waste management policies at the municipal level and beyond. On the other hand, facilitating the assessment of values in the informal sector's recycling ecosystem may create opportunities, for instance to promote informal and formal sector integration or identify economic opportunities.

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Informal recycling workers constitute a particularly vulnerable livelihood group. Socio-economic precarity, a negative perception of its work and marginalisation tend to be particularly acute at the lower levels of the informal recycling ecosystem.⁸ Informal waste pickers, collectors and sorters are exposed to occupational health hazards when working without adequate training or access to safety equipment.⁹ Women and children are particularly vulnerable, as they are overrepresented in labour-intensive, low-earning and hazardous occupations.¹⁰ Lack of citizenship rights, absence of labour regulations, limited access to social security schemes, social exclusion and exploitation further intensify livelihood precarity.¹¹



Source: Exposure Visuals/Shutterstock, 2020

Beyond addressing the structural vulnerabilities of informal recycling workers, efforts to integrate them in public and/or private waste management systems must consider the larger informal recycling ecosystem including material flows, informal supply chains and complex trade relations both within and between informal and formal waste management actors.

A legally binding international agreement inclusive of the informal recycling sector

National actions and voluntary commitments are unlikely to be sufficient for tackling global plastic pollution.¹² Advocated by academics,^{13,14} non-governmental organizations,^{15,16} and beyond, the question of a legally binding agreement is at the heart of discussions and resolutions proposed for consideration and adoption at UNEA 5.2, though diverse mechanisms and pathways are under consideration. For example, a resolution jointly led by Peru and Rwanda to establish an intergovernmental negotiating committee is co-sponsored by 54 countries and the EU – a testimony to the momentum gathered around an international legally binding agreement.¹⁷ However, not all actors and countries agree to the legally binding provision, largely on account of socio-economic and political concerns, as evident in resolutions advocating only voluntary

measures. The divergences between country positions highlight the necessity of a broad and inclusive approach that responds to concerns linked to international equity and justice but also to specific country contexts.

Negotiations around resolutions for a future agreement on plastic pollution present an opportunity to counter the marginalisation of the informal recycling sector. Relevant learning experiences from the design of other international conventions exist, such as the process that led to the establishment of the Minamata Convention on Mercury, which explicitly addresses an informal sector (e.g Article 7 – artisanal and small-scale gold mining).¹⁸ Protecting the livelihoods of informal recycling workers in an international agreement is particularly urgent amid current discussions around the “formalization” of the sector¹⁹ and with regards to the ongoing design and implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes in many countries. Although crucial for holding producers and manufacturers accountable for the end-of-life fate of plastics, EPR schemes too often sideline the role and concerns of the informal recycling sector. A future international agreement could provide the legal basis for establishing a global EPR scheme.²⁰ However, such an initiative needs to be actively co-designed with the informal recycling sector, its workers and representatives.²¹

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The future international agreement on plastic pollution should address the full lifecycle of plastics and be legally binding.
- The past and present contribution of the informal recycling sector to global plastic waste management should be duly recognized, and the needs and capabilities of its workers reflected as part of ongoing negotiations.
- The diversity of the informal recycling sector across socio-political and geographical contexts should be acknowledged and accounted for in design provisions of an agreement.
- The agreement should establish clear, measurable targets and indicators to support informal recycling workers. Particularly important are the establishment of health and safety criteria, the promotion of fair remuneration and the facilitation of access to social security entitlements..
- Accurate data is important to inform negotiations and follow-up action. In municipal areas where informal recycling sectors are well established, accurate baseline data needs to be collected. To enable this, robust data collection tools and methodologies (both qualitative and quantitative) must be further developed and supported to strengthen science-based decision-making.
- A blanket ban on various plastic products, including single-use ones, requires careful consideration for potential social impacts. Bans may be undermined by weak enforcement and hampered by a lack of environmentally friendly alternatives, and risk driving informal recycling actors underground, making it harder to deliver assistance, technology and health improvements.
- The international agreement should provide a toolbox of regulatory and market-based measures that are matched with capacity development and financial assistance for developing countries which have a large informal sector. This is important in order to account for historically rooted differences in per capita production and consumption of plastic materials, and eventual management of waste.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this policy brief are independent and do not necessarily reflect those of institutions to which contributors and discussants are attached to.

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