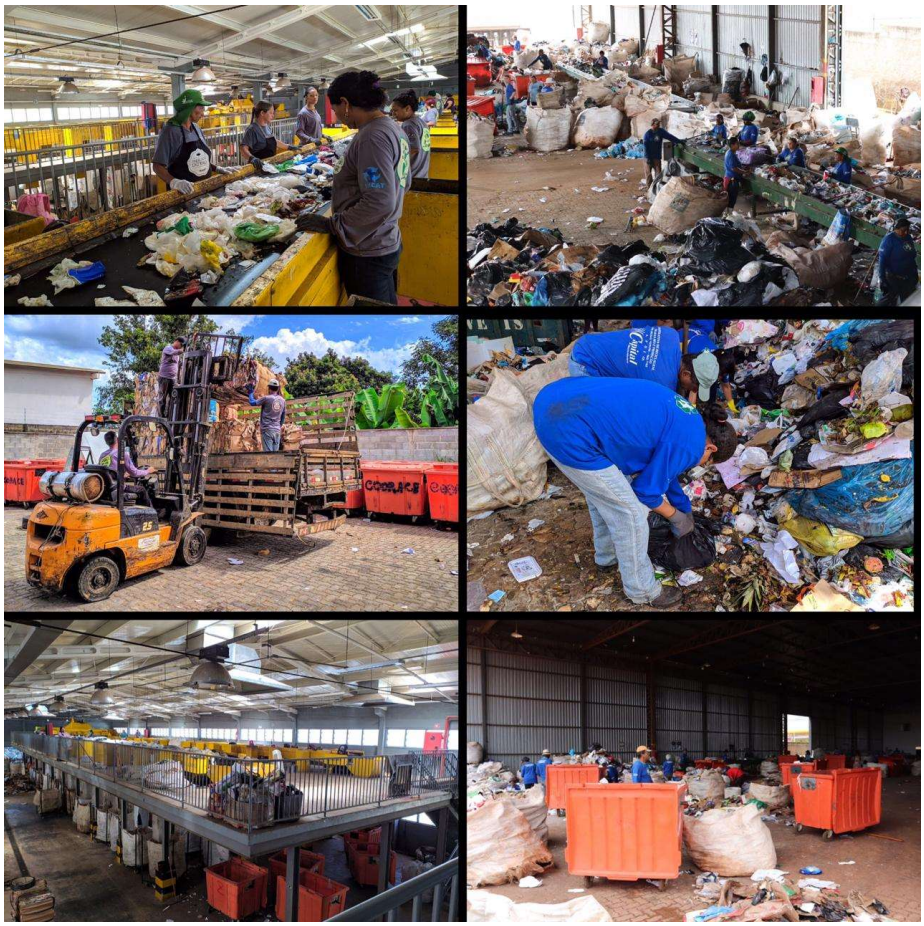
WWOSH

Waste Workers Occupational Safety And Health Committee

Statement to recognize waste collectors as Essential Workers- Aug 2020



Participation and support

WHWB workplace health without borders

WWOSH Waste Workers Occupational Safety and Health WHWB Committee

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AMUR GRUPO DE PESQUISA SOBRE ACESSO A MEDICAMENTOS E USO RESPONSÁVEL

WIEGO Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing

UnB PROGRAMA DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM CIÊNCIAS E TECNOLOGIAS EM SAÚDE

WHWB-WWOSH supports waste workers being designated as 'Essential Workers'

Summary

Waste Waste workers are essential to national and local economies and to a healthful environment. The purpose of this document is to express our support for their recognition as essential service providers who make a major contribution to human and environmental health, and to call for urgent measures to reduce the risks of COVID19 infection that they and their families face.

World-wide an estimated 20 million people earn their living from recycling waste[1]. Waste work involves the collection, sorting, and processing of used or discarded materials. Waste workers generally have little or no health and safety protection. Their workplaces, whether in the streets, open dumps, sanitary landfills, or sorting warehouses, each present different types and degrees of risk. Workers are exposed to injuries and disease from exposure to medical waste, heavy metals, dust and chemical vapors, and hot and cold environments. Working conditions are precarious, contributing to socio-economic and psychological stress, as does most work under informal employment arrangements without access to social protection. In short, earnings are low and risks are high. These risks are intensified by Covid-19 due to the likelihood of contact with contaminated surfaces and the fact they often work in close proximity to each other.

About this committee:

The goal of **WWOSH - Waste Workers Occupational Safety and Health**, part of Workplace Health Without Borders (WHWB), is for all workers to have a safe workplace and return home safe and healthy every day.

WWOSH's mission is to:

- Design a sustainable model for Occupational Safety Health Programs for waste workers;
- Construct a framework for analyzing, envisioning and developing present and future scenarios of waste workers` health;
- Identify funding sources for OSH projects including grants;
- Educate professionals on the issues and develop projects related to the protection and health promotion of this category of workers.

Project areas:

- Safety training for waste workers
- Pilot safety and health interventions
- Research projects targeting risk reduction for workers
- Build a research database
- Design a sustainable model for OSH programs for waste workers
- Design/disseminate educational materials for workers (e.g. related to hygiene measures)

Introduction

Since December 2019, the world is experiencing a new reality related to Covid-19. That disease is highly transmissible, both by droplets (sneezing, coughing) and by surfaces, contaminated materials and objects; having been considered, on March 11, 2020, a pandemic by the World Health Organization[2,3]. The SARS-CoV-2 virus causes an infection that, in most cases, runs without major harm to patients. However, a significant number of those infected are highly vulnerable and severely affected by the disease, requiring hospital care. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), older adults and people who have serious underlying medical conditions, such as

heart disease, lung disease, or diabetes, appear to be at greater risk of developing more serious complications of Covid-19[4] disease.

Studies by CDC3 scientists, the Universities of California, Los Angeles and Princeton, and by Kampf et al[5] (2020) evaluated the resistance of the virus (SARS-CoV-2) in different materials varying from hours to days. Many developing countries decided to stop the selective collection (sorting and recycling process) during this time due to the risks that waste pickers were exposed to. Initially, it was a very good strategy since nobody knew how to prevent this disease. Over time, in some cities the municipality or the established waste picker cooperatives adopted strategies to restart their recycling operations. In Santana de Parnaíba, for example, the cooperative Avemare, continues to work, however under specific circumstances. Work is done in shifts to reduce the number of workers present at each time and to facilitate distancing. All vulnerable individuals have been excluded from work. Other groups, such as Cooperfenix in Diadema, have adopted measures to leave the collected material sit in the patio for at least one day before material sorting begins.

According to Wiego[6], waste pickers are facing both health and financial risks in this pandemic — from handling contaminated materials to losing essential daily earnings when governments order work stoppages and request people to stay home. Their organizations are stepping up to help and to advocate for them. Yet, the livelihoods of these workers depend on their daily earnings. Stopping work to stay at home could move their households into extreme poverty. Plus, they often live in informal, crowded settlements that lack running water and sanitation. In order to benefit these workers and their families, governments must enable waste pickers to follow public health guidelines. Income support, access to water/sanitizer and provision of protective gear are crucial, as is access to health care and social protection.

Recent mapping carried out by WIEGO in Brazil with 150 cooperatives across 21 states in the country showed the readiness of cooperative members to implement safety measures in their workplaces which speaks to the role of these organizations in implementing decent work conditions: 98 percent of surveyed cooperatives reported adoption of three essential safety measures (PPEs, disinfection and personal hygiene and providing prevention guidelines to cooperative members). The research found out that 1 percent of the almost 5,000 cooperative members have reported COVID19, which is low compared with rate of infection amongst formal waste collectors in Brazil which is 5,47 [7]. This research indicates that waste pickers are able to adapt to safer work conditions and are thus able to continue providing essential services[8] which points to the need for government interventions to support these workers.

To find practical and appropriate interventions, national and local governments must work together on a coordinated response plan along with waste picker organizations and cooperatives. Public policies must be strengthened in order to support the workers during this global crisis and improve occupational safety so as to minimize the risk of accidents and disease, as recommended by the Ministry of Health[9]. It is also important that the public understand that the waste workers play an essential role in environmental protection by collecting and appropriately managing waste, and that it is crucial that the workers in turn be protected from contamination by correctly disposing of household and commercial residues. Environmental education can be critical in informing the public regarding careful disposal of household waste[10].

WWOSH, which works with public health experts and partners from the University of Brasilia as well as WIEGO, has developed guidelines for waste pickers, their organizations and sanitation agencies to help prevent the spread of the disease https://www.wiego.org/safer-recycling[11]. In addition, posters, a video clip and a Q&A graphic document were elaborated and translated into five languages to inform waste pickers in many parts of the world how to prevent COVID-19 infection and transmission[12]. http://www.whwb.org/2020/05/wwosh-multilingual-covid-19-qa-graphic-document/.

One example of the effectiveness of this approach comes from Colombia, where there was recognition of recycling by waste pickers as an essential public service. As a consequence, waste workers were allowed to carry out their work during quarantines if they followed specified health and safety protocols, such as using personal protection, their collection centers for recyclable materials were

allowed to remain open during the quarantine, and they were allowed to continue to commercialize the recovered recyclable waste and therefore continue to be remunerated for their services. This measure does not apply to those waste pickers over the age of 70 who must remain in mandatory confinement.

Aspects related to the essentiality of the service

Collection and separation of recyclable materials are essential basic sanitation services, which is recognized in different ways in the laws of most countries. Sorting and recycling are subject to legal and normative provisions applicable to basic sanitation and must be considered essential services or activities, since they embody measures that aim, ultimately at the prevention of diseases and the promotion of health, in correlation with the need to preserve the fundamental human rights to quality of life and human dignity. Recognizing waste pickers as essential workers also acknowledges their role in the circular economy[13] and further moves waste pickers into decent work.

Recognizing waste as a resource and recovering these resources breaks away from the linear economy of extraction, manufacturing, consumption and discard. Waste pickers are central in supporting the circular economy. While in most cases the contribution of waste pickers is not formally recognized, partnerships with NGOs and academic centres exist and the indirect contributions of the knowledge of waste pickers becomes more evident; in those spaces they are accepted as legitimate actors in the waste management system. Their daily work provides them with distinct learnings on waste, waste disposal, and resource recovery. Industry also holds responsibility of the material and through Extended Producers Responsibility programs contribute to the funding of selective waste collection

By recognizing the essentiality of the service of waste pickers we create opportunities for generating employment and income, and we tackle poverty reduction with more inclusive waste management. The target 'decent and full productive work' is framed under goal number 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and translates into employment creation, enterprise development, social protection, safety standards, rights at work and a governance structure that fosters social dialogue. The formal and the informal are deeply intertwined and informal workers generate indispensable goods and services. Organizing, recognizing and integrating waste pickers in formal waste management is key to achieving the essential securities outlined by the International Labour Organization[14] (labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security and representation security).

The collective practices of organized recycling generate social, economic and environmental benefits, which are not widely recognized. If waste pickers were to be formally designated as "Essential Workers" these diverse roles become more visible. An inclusive political agenda on waste management will not only provide more opportunities to achieve the ILO proposed essential securities, necessary for decent work (SDG # 8) but there is the potential to address several other goals, including: poverty reduction (SDG # 1), gender equality (SDG # 5), inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable cities and human settlements (SDG # 11) and sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG # 12)[15].

Waste pickers help keep cities clean and reduce Greenhouse gas emissions by diverting materials into the recycling stream instead of landfills, thus contributing to the sustainability of the planet. In developing countries, the informal recycling sector is responsible for recovering as much as 65% of plastic waste, thus also reducing the plastic leakage into the ocean.

In view of all these benefits deriving from the work of waste pickers it is critical to recognize all waste workers (whether informal, organized or formalized) as essential workers who are cleaning up the environment and recovering resources for repair, recycling and reuse but who are also exposed to significant health risks, compounded by the current Covid19 pandemic. These workers deserve safe working conditions and fair remuneration. Waste Workers (which includes waste pickers) are essential because they protect us from disease, and thus they need extra support to stay healthy themselves (this includes PPEs, social security, financial support, recognition, participation in public policy making regarding waste governance).

Incineration is not the solution

Due to the pandemic, there is a danger that there may be a renewed call to use waste incineration or other highly polluting measures as an alternative to recycling. WWOSH does not support these alternatives (waste to energy, plastic to fuel, energy recovery, chemical conversion, or waste incineration) as they entail greater health risks to both workers and the general population in the form of environmental impacts. Waste incineration is, in effect, destroying resources which further perpetuates the linear economy and promotes wasteful behaviors instead of working towards the circular economy and greater sustainability. Furthermore, incineration does not support the social and solidarity economy, nor does it generate much needed employment; to the contrary it rather destroys livelihood by reducing recycling.

Resource recovery and recycling can reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and waste pickers play a crucial role in providing these recycling services (collection, separation, cleaning, stocking and commercialization into the circular economy). We can measure the GHG emission reductions achieved by organized waste pickers, highlighting their environmental contributions. Research shows that the work of waste pickers can achieve important energy savings and reductions in GHG emissions, and thus waste pickers should be considered as participants in the carbon credit market. Based on research findings, a GHG accounting calculator for waste pickers was developed to estimate the emissions reductions and energy savings from waste picker cooperatives[16]. These facts confirm the importance of the service waste pickers provide to the community and the environment.

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