

A METHODOLOGY TO ASSESS THE LIVING INCOME OF WASTE PICKERS



(Optional) Please provide a picture of your case study

Study location	New Delhi
Organization or researcher that developed the case study	Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group
Dates	June-August 2024

Introduction to the document:

Context:

In 2024, the study [“A living income for the informal waste sector”](#) piloted a methodology with local NGOs to assess the concept of a “living income” for informal waste workers with the goal to create a practical methodology to promote the provision of a living income within these supply chains. Case surveys were developed in 2023 in locations in India, Ghana and Brazil.

This toolkit was developed in the first half of 2024, as part of Phase 2 of the Living Income Assessment. The toolkit is open to be used by anyone and can be used under the CC 4.0 license.

Structure of the overall toolkit:

There are three components to the overall toolkit: a PowerPoint manual, an Excel document and a Word template.

1. A PowerPoint toolkit gives a complete overview of the full methodology.
2. An Excel document is for the final data of the conducted assessment to be recorded.
3. This Word document records the background of the case study, note down critical assumptions taken in the Final Data sheet (Tab 2) in the Excel document, and summarize key learnings and recommendations.

1. Introduction and Methodology:

As India's population continues to grow and urbanisation takes place, it is inevitable that there would be an explosion in the generation of municipal solid waste (MSW) across cities in India. The municipal solid waste generated can cause considerable damage to the environment and public health and places an added strain on urban local bodies (ULB's) that collect, transport, treat and scientifically disposal of solid wastes.

Urban India alone generates nearly 0.15 million tonnes per day of MSW, with per capita generation ranging between 0.30 kg per day to 0.45 kg per day.¹ Furthermore, the engagement of the formal waste management system remains low in the cities, primarily due to insufficient funds, low sectoral development and lack of know-how about sustainable waste management businesses. Hence, waste collection and material recycling activities are majorly performed by the informal waste sector.

Informal stakeholders are waste-pickers in dumpsites and at communal waste collection points, informal waste-collectors, itinerant waste-buyers, small junkshop dealers and big waste godown-owners. According to the Solid Waste Management Rules (SWM), 2016: "Informal waste collectors" includes individuals, associations or waste-traders who are involved in sorting, sale and purchase of recyclable materials.² The Rules, also define a "waste picker" as a person informally engaged in the collection and recovery of reusable and recyclable solid waste from the source of waste generation to sale of waste to recyclers directly or through intermediaries.³ While the role wastepickers play in waste recycling practices is invaluable, their contributions in collecting, sorting, processing, storing and trading waste materials in the recycling value chain is often overlooked.

Systemiq Ltd, in partnership with the Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, conducted a survey to assess the living income of waste pickers. The survey aimed to determine whether waste pickers at Delhi landfills can save their earnings from the sale of plastics like Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) bottles, polypropylene (PP), and other materials such as glass and metals. Additionally, the report examines the expenses of waste pickers on necessities such as food, housing, utilities (electricity and water), children's education, and travel. It also explores the income wastepickers earn from alternative activities and whether these earnings, combined with those from waste picking, are sufficient to ensure savings.

To achieve this, a questionnaire with 114 questions was distributed to 67 waste pickers (30 men and 37 women), to understand their financial earnings, needs and expenditures for wastepickers in Delhi. A separate and additional questionnaire comprising 17 questions was circulated among 21 wastepickers (3 males and 18 females). Geographically the zone was the Northern part of Delhi under the jurisdiction of

¹ Richa Singh, 'Solid waste management: Why integrating informal sector is a must' (Down to Earth, 21 July 2022) <<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/waste/solid-waste-management-why-integrating-informal-sector-is-a-must-83841>> accessed 12 July 2024.

² Rule 2 (28), The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016.

³ Rule 2 (58), The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016.

the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. The purpose was to develop a further understanding of their healthcare and education related needs and expenditures.

Surveyors were trained, and the questionnaire was made available online in English and Hindi for data collection. Respondents provided informed consent through signed forms in their preferred language. Interviews were conducted both in person and over the phone, with the concept of consent clearly explained to all participants. The collected data was then cleaned and analysed. Trends were discussed with the research team, leading to the formulation of conclusions and recommendations.

A. Establishing a Baseline

The key findings of this report are as follows:

1. **Number of participants, gender and age group:** A total of 67 waste pickers participated in this survey. Out of these 67, 37 of the waste pickers who participated in the survey were women while the remaining 30 were men. 40% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey were between the ages of 20-30.
2. **Size of household:** 39% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that they have a household that is comprised of 2-4 people. Another 37% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey had a household comprised of 4-6 people.
3. **When did the waste pickers start waste picking:** 37% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that they were between 4-14 years of age when they started waste picking indicating the incidence of child labour in wastepicking.
4. **Reasons waste pickers started waste picking:** Wastepickers who answered this question could provide multiple responses. In this regard, 90% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey shared that waste picking was either a means of livelihood or reported that they had no other alternate sources of income (69%).
5. **Main typologies of the surveyed workers (e.g., independent workers, organized in a co-operative):** 93% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they work independently while the remaining 7% stated that they are organized in cooperatives and do salaried work at an MRF.
6. **Main sources of waste for the surveyed workers (e.g., a dumpsite, street waste picking):** 46% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that their main source of waste was from landfills. Other sources of waste came from door- to-door waste collection and waste from MRF's (27% each).
7. **Alternative income streams other than waste picking:** Only 10% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that they have alternative income streams other than waste picking.
8. **On average, how much time do wastepickers spend picking waste:** On average, 51% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey between 7-9 hours a day on waste picking.
9. **On average, how many days in the week do the surveyed wastepickers work:** 42% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey spend more than 5 days in the week on waste picking.
10. **How many waste pickers had access to vehicles (e.g., tricycles):** Only 4% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they own a vehicle. 73% of the wastepickers commute to work on foot while another 19% hire auto rickshaws (tuk-tuks) to go to work.

11. **Number of wastepickers facing food insecurity:** 64% of the participants who took part in the survey stated that in the last 12 months, there have been instances where they have not been able to eat or buy food due to a lack of money. A further 49% stated that they skipped a meal to save money.
12. **Education of wastepicker Children:** As far as access to education in government schools is concerned, only 42% of the wastepickers who took part in the survey stated that their children are enrolled in government schools. This is despite the fact that Right to Education is a Fundamental Right in the Indian Constitution.
13. **Number of wastepickers experiencing difficulty with access to decent housing:** There are several parameters that define decent housing which include access to utilities like water and electricity apart from getting access to sufficient living space and adequate lighting (among others). In this regard, 58% of the wastepickers stated that they do not have access to safe sanitation and a further 60% stated that they do not have access to sufficient living space (35-60 square metres). 58% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that their housing situation is one that has several cracks and leaks. 64% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey do not have access to a safe ambient environment.
14. **Number of wastepickers experiencing difficulty with access to healthcare:** 95% of the wastepickers who took part in the survey stated that they face difficulty with getting access to health care due to the lack of medical/ health insurance. Furthermore, 93% of these wastepickers who took part in the survey stated that they did not avail medical/ health insurance because they couldn't afford it or were unaware of existing government health insurance schemes or how to access it.
15. **Salaries of wastepickers:** 93% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they work independently as opposed to being organized in a cooperative. On average, 34% of these independently working wastepickers earned between Rs. 200-300 in a day(Rs. 4800-7200 per month assuming they work 6 days a week) whereas the remaining 7% of the wastepickers who were organized in cooperatives and obtained their income from working at MRF's such as Zakhira (run in North Delhi by Chintan, Coca Cola India Foundation and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi) earned over Rs. 18,000/- a month for waste picking.

B - Living Income Estimate

B1 – Healthy Diets Survey:

All wastepickers who participated (100%) in this survey unanimously agreed that they spent the most on food. Furthermore, wastepickers are rarely able to spend money to avail a healthy diet. In this regard, 33% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that they spend between Rs. 450-500/- per day. A further 31% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they spend Rs. 250-350/- per day.

Details about the costs of a healthy diet:

The following food items were among the most commonly consumed foods and were key components of a wastepickers' healthy diet:

1. Rice- 97% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that rice constituted a large part of the diet of wastepickers
2. Green Vegetables- 96% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that green vegetables constituted a part of the diet of wastepickers.
3. Dal/ Pulses- 72% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that dal/pulses constituted a large part of the diet of wastepickers.
4. Bread- 58% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that bread constituted a large part of the diet of wastepickers.
5. Milk- 51% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that milk was an important part of their diet.
6. Fruits- 34% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that fruits were a crucial component of their diet.
7. Meat/Eggs- 30% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that meat/ eggs are a crucial component of their diet.

Details about the critical assumptions that were made when estimating the costs of a healthy diet:

While wastepickers are aware of what constitutes a healthy diet, their income limits them from accessing a healthy and nutritious diet on a regular basis.

75% stated that they have not been able to have a healthy and nutritious meal in the last 12 months. 51% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey have stated that because of a lack of money and other resources, they skipped a meal. A further 43% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that due to a lack of money and other resources, they went without eating for an entire day.

B2 - Decent Housing Survey

Details about the costs of decent housing

For the purpose of this survey, 'decent housing' refers to access to electricity, availability of natural light and ventilation in each room of the house, safe sanitation, sufficient living space (i.35-60 square metres) and a safe ambient environment (among others). In this regard, wastepickers on average spend approximately Rs. 5,543/- (per person) a month for decent housing. This includes the expenses incurred for house rent, repair costs, utilities like electricity and water.

In this regard, 79% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that their house is made from acceptable and affordable building materials. A further 93% of these wastepickers stated that they have access to electricity, 54% had access to light and a further 46% had houses that were well ventilated. However, 58% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey conceded that they do not have access to safe sanitation and a further 60% stated that they do not have access to sufficient living space. 58% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that their housing situation is one that has several cracks and leaks. 64% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey do not have access to a safe ambient environment.

Details about the critical assumptions that were made when estimating the costs of decent housing

While many wastepickers have access to basic construction materials and electricity, there are considerable deficiencies in sanitation, living space, natural light, ventilation, structural integrity, and environmental safety. These factors highlight the need for significant improvements in their housing conditions to meet the standards of 'decent housing'.

Wastepickers live in substandard and unrecognized informal settlements that are often close to landfills in the poorest parts of the city under unhealthy and unhygienic conditions with limited access to drinking water and public toilets. According to the NCR Planning Board, several who migrate to the national capital come from low-income migrant communities and set up their homes close to where they work due to a lack of other/better housing options. Migrant wastepickers residing close to these landfills, for instance, are held up in temporary homes, performing informal labour and lack access to social security schemes. The lack of access to social security schemes or a permanent address also prevents wastepickers from accessing improved housing and living facilities.

B3 – Healthcare Costs

Details about the costs of healthcare

On average, wastepickers spend approximately Rs. 4,490/- a month on healthcare. This includes the amount spent on buying medication (Rs. 1,000/- per month), getting appointments with doctors/ physicians (Rs.1,282/- per month), treatment of diseases like malaria or dengue fever (Rs. 1,875/- per month) and Rs.333/- for their stay in hospitals.

66% of these wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that they spend a significant amount on health care and medical expenses. Most wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that the matters listed below are among the most common health hazards they face as wastepickers:

1. Health hazards leading to chronic diseases (87%)
2. Injuries from sharp objects (87%)
3. Injuries from lifting heavy weights (79%)
4. Dehydration (72%)
5. Dog bites (49%)
6. Road accidents (46%)
7. Skin diseases (6%)

While these are all serious health concerns faced by wastepickers, 96% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they do not have access to medical/ health insurance therefore access to affordable health care is a serious challenge for wastepickers. Furthermore, 55% of these wastepickers are unaware that there are government health insurance schemes and 93% are financially insolvent and unable to afford medical insurance even after they have been made aware of these insurance schemes.

Besides the limited access that wastepickers have to health insurance, there are additional expenses that wastepickers bear for availing medication and consulting physicians. Expenses also vary depending on what illnesses they contract at work and if they need to be hospitalised to avail treatment and seek the same treatment on repeated occasion.

On average, 67% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey spend anywhere between Rs. 1,250-1500/- in a month on medication. Additionally, they spend between Rs. 750-1,250/- a month to consult a doctor for an appointment. 95% of these wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they do not get any discounts or concessions when availing medication or vaccines.

Diseases like typhoid are among the most commonly contracted among wastepickers, many of whom have reported that they need repeated treatments for the same diseases. Usually, wastepickers diagnosed with diseases like typhoid, tuberculosis and dengue fever require wastepickers to be admitted to hospitals more than once a month, or require them to consult a doctor/ physician more than once a month. Indeed, 62% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey reported that they visit the hospital 2-3 times in a month if they are diagnosed with these diseases. Furthermore, wastepickers

typically spend more than Rs. 2,500/- to treat these diseases in a month. Depending on how serious the illness is, wastepickers (6 out of the 16) who participated in this survey stated that they are admitted to the hospital, spend in excess of Rs.5,000/- per month for their treatment and stay in the hospital.

Details about the critical assumptions that were made when estimating the costs of healthcare

The findings of this survey suggest that healthcare expenses incurred by wastepickers represent a substantial financial burden. This is evidenced by the fact that 66% of wastepickers report significant spending on healthcare, it can be assumed that the expenses incurred for healthcare consume a considerable portion of their income. This is likely due to the numerous health hazards associated with their work. The most common issues include chronic diseases, injuries from sharp objects and heavy lifting, dehydration, dog bites, road accidents, and skin diseases. The prevalence of these health risks underscores the frequent need for medical attention among wastepickers.

One of the critical challenges faced by wastepickers is their lack of access to medical or health insurance. 96% of those surveyed reported having no health insurance coverage, making it difficult for them to afford healthcare services. Moreover, 55% are unaware of government health insurance schemes, and even among those who are aware, 93% are financially unable to afford such insurance. This lack of insurance coverage means that wastepickers must pay out-of-pocket for all their medical expenses, further exacerbating their financial strain.

The out-of-pocket expenses for wastepickers can be quite high. On average, 67% of the wastepickers surveyed spend between Rs. 1,250-1,500/- per month on medication, and an additional Rs. 750-1,250/- per month on doctor consultations. These costs are compounded by the fact that 95% of wastepickers do not receive any discounts or concessions when purchasing medication or vaccines. The financial burden is further intensified when wastepickers contract serious illnesses like typhoid, tuberculosis, or dengue fever, which often require repeated treatments and hospitalizations. For those diagnosed with these diseases, frequent hospital visits (2-3 times per month) are common, and the associated costs can exceed Rs. 2,500/- per month. In more severe cases, wastepickers may spend over Rs. 5,000/- per month on treatment and hospital stays.

Overall, the combination of high medical expenses, lack of insurance coverage, and frequent exposure to health risks leads to a situation where healthcare costs significantly impact the financial well-being of wastepickers.

B4 – Education Costs

On average, wastepickers spend approximately Rs. 5,649/- per month for education irrespective of whether or not they attend government or private schools. The expenses borne are not only inclusive of education fees (Rs. 4,375/- a month) but also include the expenses that are borne for procuring uniforms (Rs. 199/- a month), purchasing books and stationery (Rs. 60/- per month) and travel expenses (Rs. 1015/- per month) borne for travel between home and school.

24% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that a significant amount of income is spent on their children's education. 58% of these wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that their children are enrolled in private schools and as a result, spend a considerable amount more than the remaining 42% of the wastepickers whose children attend government schools. 89% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they spend between Rs. 3,000-5,000/- in a month for their children enrolled in private school.

Apart from the amounts that wastepickers spend on their children's tuition fees in private schools, 95% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that there are additional expenses incurred for their children enrolled in private/public schools such as for uniforms, books, stationery and transportation.

The families who have stated that their children attend government school have also benefited from not only spending much less on their children's education as compared to those attending private schools but have benefitted because there are no added expenses that are incurred by wastepickers as a result of the mid-day meal schemes (free midday meals for all students via government). Indeed, 44% of these children of wastepickers attending government schools have stated that their children have access to the school's mid-day meal schemes.

Details about the critical assumptions that were made when estimating the costs of education

A significant portion of wastepickers' income is allocated to their children's education. Education represents a substantial financial burden for many families, particularly those whose children attend private schools. Given that 58% of these families have gone for private education, it is assumed that they face higher educational costs compared to those whose children attend government schools.

The financial commitment to private schooling is notably higher, with 89% of wastepickers reporting monthly expenditures between Rs. 3,000-5,000/- for tuition fees alone. This indicates that private education demands a significant portion of these families' limited resources. Furthermore, the costs associated with private schooling extend beyond tuition. Wastepickers also incur additional expenses for uniforms, books, stationery, and transportation (among other expenses). For instance, uniform costs can vary widely, with some families spending as little as Rs. 350-700/- annually, while others spend over Rs. 2,000/-. The expense of stitching uniforms further adds to this financial burden, with some wastepickers spending between Rs. 350-1,000/- per year.

Books and stationery are another recurring expense, with 55% wastepickers reporting spending over Rs. 1,000/- on these items, while others spend Rs. 250-500/- monthly. Transportation costs also contribute significantly to the overall expense of education. Seven out of 18 wastepickers stated that they spend between Rs. 750-1,000/- per month on commuting to and from school, particularly those who opt for privately hired auto-rickshaws. This suggests that transportation is a considerable and ongoing cost for families seeking private education.

In contrast, wastepickers whose children attend government schools face much lower educational expenses. These families benefit from not only reduced costs but also the added advantage of the mid-day meal scheme provided by the schools. As a result, 44% of wastepickers with children in government schools reported that their children have access to these meals, reducing that particular cost. This highlights the relative affordability, and additional benefits associated with government schooling, which can significantly ease the economic burden on wastepicker families.

B5 – Costs of decent work

Details about the costs of decent work

All wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they incur expenses for decent work. On average, wastepickers would spend Rs. 52/- per month on gloves and PPE kits whilst they are carrying out their work.

During the course of this survey, wastepickers were asked if they have access to any of the following at their workplace:

- A space to rest during the day
- Safety gear- gloves, masks and jacket
- Safe drinking water
- Sanitation facilities or toilets.

55% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they do not have access to any of these facilities at their workplace. 51% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that on average they spend 7-9 hours a day and a further 42% stated that they spend more than 5 days in a week on waste picking with limited access to any of these facilities. 46% of the wastepickers stated that they cannot afford to go without any revenue for a day. Only 39% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey said that they can afford to take at least 1-2 days off from work without revenue.

While the money they earn is often expended for health care, education, housing etc, 49% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they are required to procure their own PPE kits and safety gear like gloves, masks and jackets. 31% of the wastepickers who participated in the survey stated that they spend between Rs. 200-300/- a month of their living income for PPE kits and gloves.

Details about the critical assumptions that were made when estimating the costs of decent work

Based on the survey, the cost of decent work for wastepickers involves ensuring access to essential facilities and safety gear. While 55% lack basic amenities like rest spaces, safe drinking water, and sanitation, 49% need to procure their own PPE, improving conditions would require substantial investment. On average, wastepickers spend 7-9 hours a day, more than five days a week on the job, with 46% unable to forgo a day's income. Given that 31% spend Rs. 200-300/- monthly on safety gear, the cost of decent work includes providing necessary amenities and gear, compensating for lost income during rest days, and improving overall working conditions to support their health and well-being.

B6 – Savings

Details about the estimated need for savings

Based on the survey data, wastepickers face significant financial burdens that impact their ability to save money.

The primary expenditure for wastepickers is food, with 33% spending Rs. 450-500/- per day and 31% spending Rs. 250-350/- per day. This expenditure includes essential components of their diet such as rice, green vegetables, dal/pulses, bread, milk, fruits, and occasionally meat or eggs. The high cost of food, which consumes a large portion of their income, leaves little room for savings. The highest wastepickers spend on food is INR 15,000 per month.

Housing costs also place a considerable strain on their finances as 10% of their monthly income goes into availing decent housing. While 93% have electricity, many face significant deficiencies. 58% lack safe sanitation, 60% do not have sufficient living space, and 58% live in homes with structural issues like cracks and leaks. These inadequate housing conditions require substantial investment to improve, further reducing the funds available for saving. This is only further exacerbated due to extreme weather conditions due to climate change, such as extreme heat, extreme flooding and air pollution.

Healthcare costs add another layer of financial pressure as 19% of the living income goes into healthcare. A significant portion of their income goes towards addressing health issues such as chronic diseases, injuries, dehydration, and more. With 96% of wastepickers lacking medical insurance and 93% being financially unable to afford it, healthcare expenses are a major burden. The absence of insurance exacerbates their financial instability and limits their ability to save.

Education expenses further strain wastepickers' finances, as 33% of their income goes into their children's education. This not only includes the tuition fee but also the expenses incurred for buying uniform material, stitching uniforms, buying books and stationary and transportation between school and home. However, children in private schools spend more compared to those whose children attending government schools, where mid-day meal schemes provide some relief. Despite this, education costs remain a significant financial obligation, affecting their savings potential.

Finally, the cost of decent work conditions also impacts wastepickers' finances. Many lack basic workplace amenities such as rest spaces, safety gear, safe drinking water, and sanitation facilities. Almost 14% of the wastepickers living income goes into ensuring they are able to avail decent working conditions. 49% of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they need to buy their own personal protective equipment (PPE) and 55% stated that they lack access to necessary facilities. The combination of these challenges means that wastepickers struggle to save money, underscoring the need for improved support and resources to enhance their financial stability.

C – Compiling Benchmark Incomes

Details about the approach to compiling benchmark incomes

The regulation of minimum wage in India is subject to the provisions of the Code on Wages Act, 2019 which has replaced the erstwhile Minimum Wages Act, 1948; Payment of Wages Act, 1936; Payment of Bonus Act, 1965; and Equal Remuneration Act, 1976. The Code on Wages, 2019 was notified on 08th August 2019. Under this Act, employers are prohibited from paying workers less than the prescribed minimum wage. The Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi in its order dated 23 October 2023 announced its decision to raise the minimum monthly wages of unskilled workers from Rs. 17,234/- to Rs. 17,494/-, semi-skilled workers from INR 18,993 to INR 19,279 and skilled workers from INR 20,903 (US\$250.39) to INR 21,215.

As per the provision of the Code on Wages Act, 2019, wastepickers in Delhi ought to be paid at least Rs. 17,494/- but this is not an immediate guarantee since they comprise a large informal workforce and a vast majority (93%) of the wastepickers who participated in this survey stated that they work independently. A recently published report by the UNDP states that approximately 7 in 10 wastepickers have a monthly household income of less than Rs.10,000/- and only 4 percent reported earning more than Rs. 20,000 a month.

Details about the critical assumptions that were made when compiling benchmark incomes

Although the Code on Wages Act, 2019 mandates a minimum wage of at least Rs. 17,494/- for unskilled workers in Delhi, many wastepickers do not receive this amount due to the informal nature of their work. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that 93% of wastepickers work independently, which makes them more vulnerable to income fluctuations and violations of wage regulations.

The household income of wastepickers is generally low with approximately 70% earning less than Rs. 10,000/- per month and only 4% earning more than Rs. 20,000/- per month. This low-income level is influenced by the type of plastic they segregate. For instance, HDPE and mixed plastics are among the most commonly collected materials, but the market rate for these plastics is low ranging from Rs. 5-15 per kilogram. This low rate limits the earnings of wastepickers making it challenging for them to achieve financial stability.

Observations & Lessons Learnt

What are the key learnings and recommendations to improve the livelihoods and the systems around waste pickers?

1. Organizations working for wastepicker inclusion are heavily sought by wastepickers, particularly women, to augment incomes:

During the survey, it was observed that women employed as segregators at the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) were either previously involved in waste work or joined an organization for better wages. A significant number of these women are the sole earners in their families. They face considerable hardships due to non-contributing spouses, often exacerbated by issues such as alcoholism. The financial pressure on these women is further intensified by their need to pay rent, which consumes a large portion of their income, leaving little for other necessities.

2. Lack of Literacy reduces access to social leverage and reinforces cycle of poverty:

Most women surveyed were illiterate and unaware of government social security schemes. Their focus on earning daily wages for sustenance limits their engagement with these schemes, highlighting a critical gap in awareness and education.

3. Migration and Employment in Waste Management:

The majority of the wastepickers who participated in this survey are migrants from historically marginalized communities. Their status as migrants, coupled with the absence of proper documentation or a permanent address impedes their access to social security. As a result, they are confined to substandard housing in urban areas. Their migrant identity not only hinders their chances of improving their living conditions but also exacerbates their financial burdens.

4. Challenges in Waste Management Work:

Women in waste management face numerous challenges, including discrimination and exploitation. Many reported being denied fair compensation, with deductions made from their collected goods or being forced to sell at low rates. Additionally, wastepickers across genders lack the means to purchase personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, exposing them to health hazards. The confiscation of rickshaws by police and the forced sale of goods to landlords add further financial strain. Another significant challenge faced by wastepickers is that the very nature of their work exposes them to extreme weather events and air pollution which takes a considerable toll on their health.

5. Market Dynamics and Impact on Wastepickers:

The introduction of garbage collection vehicles and privatization has adversely affected the work of scrap dealers, as these vehicles collect waste directly from residents, leaving waste collectors and scrap dealers with fewer goods to collect and sell. This shift in market dynamics has created additional economic pressure on those relying on waste collection for their livelihood.

What are the actions that local governments and the private sector - including waste management, FMCGs, recyclers - should take to improve living conditions for the local waste pickers (locally, not on a global level)?

To improve the living conditions of local wastepickers, local governments and the private sector, including waste management companies, FMCG's, and recyclers, should take the following actions:

1. Health and Safety:

- Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) kits to be provided to all identified wastepickers. This includes:
 - N-95 masks and caps to prevent exposure to air pollution and extreme heat
 - Industrial eyeglasses for protection from aerosols commonly emitted from waste.
- Occupational health and safety training with wastepickers on effective ways to prevent exposure and injury.
- Hand and face washing facilities and toilets at the workplace for all MRF's, composting facilities and waste dumps and landfills, along with nudges for the wastepickers to use them.
- Nutrient supplements should be provided via government schemes (like the Take Home Ration Scheme) with special focus on pregnant and lactating mothers.

2. Education and Capacity Building

- Provide training programs to educate wastepickers on best practices in waste handling, composting, recycling, repair and upcycling, financial and digital literacy.
- Provide training in entrepreneurship, marketing, and alternative livelihoods to help wastepickers diversify their skills.

3. Health Services:

- Annual health check-ups focused on monitoring occupational illnesses with work-rest pathways for those impacted.
- Extending health insurance scheme benefits via the Ayushman- Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojana (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare).

4. Housing and Basic Amenities:

- Integration of wastepickers under housing schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awaz Yojana , ensuring access to basic amenities like clean water, sanitation, and electricity.
- Implement affordable hostel schemes where wastepickers can live with dignity at minimal cost.

5. Fair Compensation and Social Security

- Ensure wastepickers are paid fairly and regularly for their work according to the central and state government standards.

- Introduce pension and insurance schemes tailored to the needs of wastepickers, including subsidized loans for starting businesses.

6. Social Recognition and Integration

- Social Campaigns: Run programs and campaigns to elevate the social status and dignity of wastepickers, promoting their acceptance and esteem in the community.
- Integration into Formal Systems: Integrate wastepickers into the formal waste management system, giving them access to recyclables and waste collection points. This includes integrating them into the waste collection chain under Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks.

7. Incentives and Equipment

- Incentivizing collection of low-value plastics and rewarding producer companies to meet their compliance requirements.
- Monetary schemes for purchasing assets required for waste management such as cycle-rickshaws, e-rickshaws, modified autos, bailers, shredders, sorting platforms etc. Funds for repair may be provided every 3 years and funds for a new purchase may be used every 5 years.
- Available funding for upgrading infrastructure at the work facility (MRF/ dry waste collection centers etc.) under government schemes like subsidized loan scheme by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment specifically for wastepickers

8. Decentralized Job Creation:

- Promote a decentralized waste management model by awarding contracts for door-to-door collection to wastepickers, creating stable job opportunities.
- Local governments and the private sector can significantly improve the quality of life for wastepickers, ensuring their safety, dignity, and economic stability.

In compliance with the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, and the Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules, 2024, waste pickers have gained greater recognition. Recently, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment issued a scheme to mainstream waste pickers, which focuses on their integration, social security, livelihood, occupational health and safety, and capacity building, while ensuring a dignified way of living across the country.

At the state level, the Delhi Commission for Women has endorsed guidelines recognizing the particularly vulnerable position of women waste pickers. The waste picker community is also actively engaging with local governance to ensure dignified living conditions and is continuously contributing to climate action, such as through the installation of water pipelines, improved sanitation, and enhanced livelihood opportunities.