

CASE STUDY REPORT TEMPLATE



Study location	Delhi
Organization and Researcher that developed the case study	i) Members, Delhi Roundtable on Solid Waste Management (DRT) ii) Rituraj Pegu, Coordinator, Delhi Roundtable on Solid Waste Management (DRT)
Dates	August, 2025

Introduction and approach

The purpose of the living income study was to develop a grounded, location-specific picture of how informal waste pickers in Delhi earn, what keeps incomes low or volatile, and which practical interventions can improve earnings, working conditions, and dignity. The Delhi Roundtable on Solid Waste Management (DRT) conducted a total of 40 interviews across different neighbourhoods in Delhi, using structured questionnaires and interviews to document daily routines, material flows, selling arrangements, costs, risks, and access to services. The aim was not only to describe livelihoods but also to identify leverage points—for example, whether improving market access, providing secure sorting space, or formal recognition would most directly raise take-home income. The study also sought to highlight gendered realities of waste work, given that women are concentrated in sorting roles and face distinct constraints around mobility, safety, and control over sales.

The design emphasised comparability: the survey applied the same core set of 32 questions across all respondents, ensuring a consistent, quick assessment across diverse neighbourhoods—Bhalswa, Seemapuri, Chanakyapuri, Khan Market, Shahbad Dairy, Rangpuri Pahadi, Khanpur, Gharoli, Tughlakabad, Neb Sarai, and peri-urban Ghaziabad. This allowed DRT to compare how structural factors—buyer monopolies, debt, space scarcity, seasonality, policing, or municipal contracting changes—translate into income ceilings in each context.

The studies span a spectrum of urban contexts. Bhalswa, situated next to Delhi's second-largest landfill (reported at roughly 60 meters high), hosts generations of migrant families engaged in picking and sorting. Entry to the landfill is informal and risky, and respondents described control by 'dealers'/local mafias that restrict who can sell to whom, with threats for non-compliance. Many women begin work early in the morning, climbing the landfill to collect and sort before returning to nearby settlements. In contrast, Seemapuri offers relatively better tenure and services; women there frequently sort at fixed godowns on daily wages or sort at home for family-run collection enterprises.

Shahbad Dairy's Bengali Basti in North Delhi is a peripheral, underserved settlement of an estimated few thousand residents. Households are heavily engaged across the waste chain: door-to-door collectors, waste sorters in godowns, *dhalo-ghar*¹ (dumpsite) workers (neighbourhood compactor points), itinerant buyers and godown owners. The *bastis*² faces long commutes, weak services and social marginalisation that pushes residents to the urban edge. Similarly, Rangpuri Pahadi (Mahipalpur) and Khanpur have large pockets of door-to-door collectors and street pickers reliant on informal buyers.

A wider Delhi belt—Matiyala, Kishangarh, Gharoli, Tughlakabad, Neb Sarai, RK Puram Nala and Jaihind Camp—shows the same pattern: migrant households from Bihar, West Bengal and adjoining states, limited formal jobs, precarious housing on government land with arbitrary rents collected by strongmen, and frequent harassment (rickshaws seized, challans issued) that raise costs and uncertainty. Peri-urban Bhowapur/Kaushambi in Ghaziabad mirrors these dynamics, where both women and men are prominent in picking and sorting, operating without protective gear or legal recognition. Together,

¹ Dhalaos are three-walled concrete enclosures constructed by municipal bodies for temporary collection and storage of locality or market waste.

² In the Indian context, *bastis* are informal settlements or slum areas characterized by overcrowded housing and limited access to basic services.

the cases portray a city-region where informal recycling labour is indispensable yet socially invisible and structurally constrained.

Districts	Surveyed Location(s)
Shadara	New Seemapuri, Delhi
North-West	Bhalswa & Seemapuri, Delhi
New Delhi	Vivekanand Camp (Chanakyapuri), Bhalswa, Khan Market
North-Delhi	Shahbad Dairy (Bengali Basti), North Delhi
South-West	Rangpuri Pahadi (Mahipalpur) & Khanpur, Delhi
South - East Delhi	Matiyala, Kishangarh, Gharoli, Tughlakabad, Neb Sarai, RK Puram Nala, Jaihind Camp
Delhi NCR	Bhowapur/Kaushambi, Ghaziabad (U.P.)

DRT used the questionnaire template provided by Systemiq. Along with that, it has collected field notes in several sites. The common instrument had 32 questions, covering income, hours, family size, expenditure, buyer relations, reasons for joining waste work, and price data for key materials (PET, rigid plastics, cardboard, glass, aluminium). Interviews were conducted at places of work (godowns, landfill peripheries, streets) or at respondents' homes to respect schedules and caregiving responsibilities.

DRT also emphasised informed participation and trust-building rooted in a long association with local communities. Price and quantity data were collected from respondents' own sales and buyer quotes to estimate daily/weekly earnings patterns.

Two broad livelihood typologies recur across survey locations:

1) **Independent waste pickers** – Individuals/households who collect from streets, households or landfills and earn directly from the sale of recyclables. They are mobile, set their own routes and often sort at home or roadside/openspace.

2) **Informally organised workers** – Waste Pickers who majorly work in groups and sort in godowns or work under small aggregators on daily/monthly wages without formal contracts. Some also operate within family-based micro-enterprises where men collect and women sort.

In Seemapuri, a large share of women sort at godowns (informally organised), while a subset of households accumulate and then hire 2–3 women on day wages to sort—these women are wage-workers, but the household running the accumulation is effectively an independent enterprise. Bhalswa also includes independent women pickers working on the landfill under dealer control. Shahbad Dairy's

Bengali Basti shows the full chain: door-to-door collectors, itinerant buyer *dhalo-ghar* workers at compactor points, sorters, and godown owners (male and female) specialising in different plastics.

Most studies deliberately centred the voices of waste pickers themselves. It was a restricted consultation with workers to avoid biasing findings. An exception is the Ghaziabad study, which also consulted a local social activist for contextual insights on rights, recognition, and service access. Across sites, researchers additionally drew on community leaders and long-standing organisers of the DRT network to help schedule interviews and validate price/route information.

A – Current waste picker earnings

Respondents are predominantly migrants from West Bengal and Bihar, with low levels of formal schooling and few alternative jobs. Ways into the job include intergenerational skill transfer (parents/relatives in the occupation), displacement and loss of agrarian opportunities, and the pull of daily cash income without credential barriers. Individual narratives illustrate these pathways: a former rickshaw puller shifted to waste picking after unstable wages and harassment from passengers, two respondents reported leaving fish vending because of the social stigma and discrimination they faced, as the persistent smell associated with the trade led to exclusion from housing, community spaces, and everyday interactions, a woman worker moved from wage sorting to independent collection so she could balance childcare with earning. For many women, joining husbands' or in-laws' waste enterprises after marriage is common, with sorting as the primary role.

Work status varies by life stage and location. Most are full-time, working 8–12 hours, including collection and sorting; family labour is common. Mobility is higher for male collectors and lower for women sorters stationed at godowns or homes. Formal employment is rare; instead, workers rely on an ecosystem of kabadiwalas, dealers and small godowns for sales—relationships that both enable survival and constrain prices.

1. Earning Pattern

Earnings come through two main channels. First, independent collectors earn by selling sorted materials—PET, mixed rigid plastics, film, cardboard, metals—to nearby junkshops. In Seemapuri, respondents emphasised self-sorting and negotiating rates directly with multiple buyers, even transporting loads by their own rickshaws/carts to secure better prices; some reported an extra transport margin of around Rs. 2/kg when they delivered to godowns themselves. Second, informally organised workers (especially women) sort at godowns on daily wages or monthly salaries. In Shahbad Dairy, women sorting 8–10 hours a day reported around Rs. 9,000 per month, a wage they consider insufficient for basic needs. In the survey of the 40 waste pickers, it has been noticed that their monthly earnings differ from each other, where the lowest earning being Rs. 3810, and the highest is Rs. 23,929.

Spatial context shapes patterns. Waste pickers who collect waste in Bhalswa face gatekeeping by dealers who control selling; this reduces the choice of buyers and exposes workers to harassment. Seemapuri's resettlement status enables more fixed-location sorting and some family-run. Peripheral and peri-urban sites require long daily travel to reach rich waste sources (markets, high-income colonies), cutting into working hours and adding transport cost and risk. Seasonality matters; for example, during the rainy season (July/August), unexpected excess rainfall constrains them from working and spoils paper/cardboard, and winter/summer extremes reduce hours and productivity. Across sites, income volatility is the norm—missed days (illness, police action, MCD confiscations) translate immediately into lost cash flow.

2. Constraints and income limitations

i) Buyer dependence and monopolies: Most sellers are captive to a handful of junkshops or, at the landfill, to dealers who dictate prices and conditions.

ii) Debt ties: Advances or loans from middlemen lock workers into underpriced sales, perpetuating a debt dependency cycle.

iii) Space scarcity: Lack of authorised sorting and storage space forces long pushes of heavy loads across flyovers and prevents aggregation for better rates. Compactorisation - There were *dhalaos* (Dumpsites) in Delhi, which, as per the National Green Tribunal order, were closed. Some of them have been damaged/closed, some are converted into FCTS (Fixed Compactor Transfer Station) and MRFs (Material Recovery Facility), into attendance shelters/SI offices/stores, milk booths, EV charging points, RWA/NGO offices, libraries, into semi recreation centres, and composting pits and these closure of neighbourhood dumps have intensified this, disproportionately displacing waste pickers who are majorly women sorters.

iv) Policing and municipal action: Confiscation of materials and arbitrary removal of sorted dry waste create direct losses and fear.

v) Cost burdens: Pushcart maintenance - as it is the only source which helps them to transport the waste, so they have to ensure all the parts of the pushcarts are in good condition, paid access to toilets/water, informal rents, and bribes to supervisors or police erode already thin margins. Since most of the waste pickers reside in the slum/bastis, which are unauthorised so they do not have access to basic facilities like toilets, water, etc., for which they have to pay and access them.

vi) Health and safety: Toxic landfill smoke, sharp objects, heat/rain exposure without PPE reduce workable hours and trigger medical expenses.

vii) Social stigma and exclusion: Disrespect, eviction threats and lack of IDs block access to schemes.

viii) Competition and thin material streams: Private collection contracts and more waste pickers in the same area reduce available recyclables per worker.

Talking site-specific, at Shahbad Dairy, multiple roles along the chain face extractions—*pheriwala*³ (hawkers) reporting to police, *dhalo-ghar* (dumpsites) workers to supervisors/companies, and women sorters squeezed at the bottom of the wage ladder. In Seemapuri and New Seemapuri, the removal of open sorting spaces and the shift to compactors have directly reduced women's participation and family earnings. In Ghaziabad's Kaushambi belt, the absence of protective gear and legal recognition exposes women to heightened risks and unstable incomes.

3. Key takeaways and opportunities for improvement

Three takeaways stand out. First, space is income: where workers have secure, proximate sorting/storage space, they can aggregate, sort better, avoid losses from confiscations and command better buyer rates. The rapid compactorisation of neighbourhood dumps without alternative spaces has directly depressed incomes, especially for women. Second, markets are captured: dependence on single buyers (junkshops or landfill dealers) keeps prices low and volatile. Creating options—cooperative sales, direct contracts with recyclers, and transparent price listing—can lift earnings. Third, there is a

³ In the Indian context, *pheriwala* is a type of street vendor in India who sells goods by moving around rather than operating from a fixed shop or stall.

clear gender divide: women are mostly involved in sorting, which is the lowest-paid and most restricted part of waste work. They usually have little control over sales or prices, so any intervention should focus on giving women more decision-making power, better mobility, safety, and access to information

4. Opportunities flow from these insights:

- Designate micro-sorting units inside colonies and near markets
- Issue worker IDs to reduce harassment
- Facilitate SHGs/cooperatives with low-interest working capital to break debt cycles
- Enable direct connection with bulk buyers and EPR take-back channels
- Equip workers with PPE and simple tools (weighing scales, tarpaulins, rain covers) and institutionalise grievance redress with MCD/contractors at compactor points and landfills.
- Each of these is small and feasible yet collectively transformative for incomes and dignity.

B - Living Income Estimate

Based on our survey, a typical household comprised of two adults and two children. All monthly costs are calculated according to this household structure.

B 1. Healthy Diets

The estimated monthly cost of a healthy diet for a household of two adults and two children is Rs. 9,471. This figure is derived from household-reported food expenditure data collected in the survey, which reflects actual spending patterns rather than a normative food basket. The data captures local food prices, preferences, and coping mechanisms, although it does not guarantee that the reported spending ensures a fully nutrient-adequate diet. This approach is grounded in the local reality of what waste picker households can afford.

B 2. Decent Housing

Housing costs were determined through interviews with informal sector workers and reflect the conditions of informal settlements (bastis) where most waste pickers reside. A decent standard of housing is defined in this context as a dwelling with secure enough tenure, access to essential utilities, and proximity to work areas. The monthly cost of housing is Rs. 11,500, including Rs. 10,000 for rent and Rs. 1,500 for utilities. The rent is paid for the area of 900 sq ft., which is very little for a household of 4 members. These values are consistent with local market rents in settlements typically occupied by waste pickers.

B 3. Healthcare Costs

Access to healthcare for waste picker households is irregular, with most relying on public facilities like Mohalla clinics, PHC (Primary Health Centres), government hospitals, etc. Out-of-pocket costs are incurred for medicines, consultations, and transportation to health centres. The estimated monthly healthcare expense is Rs. 750, which includes Rs. 350 for medicines, Rs. 150 for consultation fees, and Rs. 250 for transportation. Formal health care coverage is not available. Waste pickers generally access government primary health care centres or hospitals for treatment, and may also visit local informal practitioners for minor health check-ups, and the estimated cost is noted and taken from the field. This reflects the real costs families face despite the availability of nominally free public healthcare.

B 4. Education Costs

Although the Right to Education Act ensures free schooling in government schools, families still bear some non-tuition costs. These include stationery and transport to school. The typical monthly education expense is Rs. 550, which includes Rs. 150 for stationery and Rs. 400 for transportation. This estimated cost is told by the waste picker from the surveyed location. They also confirmed that children go to nearby government schools where no fee has to be paid, only stationery and transport costs they have to bear. This reflects the minimum costs required to keep children enrolled and regularly attending school.

B 5. Costs of Decent Work

Enabling safe and dignified work requires additional expenditures on protective equipment and transportation. Monthly costs include gloves (Rs. 100), masks (Rs. 100), boots (Rs. 300), uniform (Rs. 500), apron (Rs. 150), other aids (Rs. 50), and safe transportation (Rs. 300). The prices for the items are based on local market rates and the typical purchase costs incurred by waste picker organizations in Delhi. To validate these estimates, a small survey with 5 waste pickers was conducted to understand their actual expenditure. The total monthly cost for work-enabling items is Rs. 1,500. These figures are based on local market rates and interviews with workers, reflecting actual replacement cycles and practical needs.

B 6. Savings

A savings buffer is incorporated to take lifecycle needs, financial instability, and shocks into account. Ten per cent of the subtotal of necessary expenses is added as savings in accordance with the living income methodology. With the subtotal before savings of Rs. 23,479, the monthly savings requirement is Rs. 2,348. As a result, the entire monthly household requirement is Rs. 25,827.

C – Comparable incomes or minimum wage

- In estimating comparable incomes, the analysis drew on multiple benchmarks, including the World Bank's extreme poverty line (Rs. 1,871/month) and poverty line (Rs. 2,619/month), statutory minimum wages (Rs. 79 per hour or about Rs. 18,456/month), and average earnings from similar occupations such as formal waste workers (Rs. 17,000/month) and construction workers (Rs. 15,000/month).
- These benchmarks were chosen to reflect both international poverty thresholds and locally relevant standards of income, with the minimum wage serving as the most direct point of comparison for unskilled labour in Delhi, and construction or waste sector wages offering sector-specific comparability.
- The key assumptions were that the Delhi/NCR minimum wages could be used as a standard reference, and average wages from similar jobs could be used when exact numbers were not available. Additionally, Rs. 17,000 for formal waste workers could be used, although no official data existed. Poverty lines were also used as a basic benchmark, even though they do not fully reflect the actual cost of living in cities.

Key learnings and recommendations learnt

Methodologically, a small, comparable sample across diverse neighbourhoods can surface robust livelihood patterns quickly. Substantively, the study shows that income is a function of

- (a) market power (number and type of buyers)
- (b) space/time to sort and store, and
- (c) transaction costs from policing, distance and weather.

Where buyers are many, space is available, and harassment is low, households do better—Seemapuri's negotiating households and Seemapuri/Bhalswa families who can self-transport illustrate this. Conversely, where buyer control is tight (landfill dealers), where compactors replace sorting, and when police and municipal measures are harsh, women leave, and salaries are not given.

A second learning is the centrality of women's labour and constraints. Women keep material value high through careful sorting, yet they often lack control over sales and pricing. Accurate income reporting was also harder where women were excluded from sales interactions—a reminder that any income study must incorporate household-level interviews or track sales directly to capture women's contributions. Finally, any 'formalisation' drive that removes open sorting without providing alternatives will depress incomes; inclusion means planning with waste workers, not around them.

Opportunities for improving livelihoods:

I. Formalisation and Recognition

Formalisation of waste pickers through the issuance of ID cards, recognition under municipal systems, and inclusion in social security frameworks is essential for ensuring their dignity and rights. Formation of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and cooperatives can further strengthen collective bargaining power and provide access to welfare schemes.

II. Skill Development and Training

Capacity-building initiatives focusing on segregation, recycling, and upcycling of waste, along with safe handling and occupational safety and health (OSH) practices, can enhance efficiency and reduce risks. Regular trainings by government bodies, municipal corporations, and stakeholders on entrepreneurship and value addition create pathways for sustainable livelihoods.

III. Better Work Opportunities

Providing waste pickers with structured opportunities like door-to-door collection contracts, integration into Dry Waste Collection Centres (DWCCs), Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs), and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) mechanisms can help transition them into more stable and dignified employment avenues. Safe transport options to markets/landfill peripheries, sanitation, drinking water facilities, on-site creches at godowns/pilot units, leadership and price-negotiation training especially for women.

IV. Social Upliftment and Diversification of Livelihoods

Access to education, healthcare, and social protection schemes such as PM Awas Yojana, Ayushman Bharat, ration cards, and ABHA cards is crucial for their upliftment. Further, enabling access to microcredit, financial inclusion, and digital literacy creates opportunities for diversifying livelihoods beyond waste picking.

V. Collaborations and Awareness

Collaborations with NGOs, CSR initiatives, and awareness campaigns can help build respect for waste pickers and highlight their contributions to urban sustainability. Partnerships also play a key role in promoting dignity of labour and ensuring long-term social integration.

In Delhi, government actions for waste pickers remain fragmented, though some initiatives signal recognition of their role in waste management. Under the Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban), the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has created Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) ([SMB Urban](#)).

The National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE) is a flagship initiative of the Government of India aimed at eliminating hazardous manual cleaning and improving the lives of sanitation workers. Implemented jointly by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment (MoSJE), Ministry of Housing & Urban Affairs (MoHUA), and the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation (DoDWS), the scheme is carried out through the National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFDC). From the financial year 2024–25, the scheme has been expanded to formally include waste pickers in its scope. This is a landmark policy shift that acknowledges their vital contribution to waste collection, recycling, and resource recovery, and seeks to integrate them into the formal solid waste management system. It ensures that waste pickers, long marginalised despite their environmental contributions, gain **safety, dignity, social security, and sustainable livelihood opportunities**. ([NAMASTE scheme guidelines](#)) On World Environment Day 2025, the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment (MoSJE) launched the Waste Picker Enumeration App under NAMASTE. The app is intended to profile up to 2.5 lakh waste pickers, issuing occupational ID cards, providing Ayushman Bharat (PM-JAY) health insurance, PPE kits, skilling opportunities, and strengthening waste-picker collectives to manage 750 Dry Waste Collection Centres (DWCCs). ([Press Information Bureau](#))