

## Letter to the Editor

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### Corresponding authors:

Patrick O'Hare and Taylor Cass Talbott;

Emails: [po35@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:po35@st-andrews.ac.uk);

[advocacy@globalrec.org](mailto:advocacy@globalrec.org)

# Just transition for waste pickers in the global plastics treaty: what is it and why is it important?

Patrick O'Hare<sup>1</sup>  and Taylor Cass Talbott<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Anthropology, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK and <sup>2</sup>International Alliance of Waste Pickers

## Abstract

This letter to the editor explores the importance of a just transition for waste pickers in the context of the global plastics treaty. It sets out ideas for just transition at the level of production reduction, replacements and substitutes, systems change and waste management.

## Impact statement

This letter makes the case for the inclusion of a binding article on Just Transition in the Global Plastics Treaty (GPT) that will emerge from negotiations at INC5.2, one that recognises the important and under-rewarded role played by waste pickers in tackling plastic pollution. It seeks to influence Member State (MS) policy-makers in this final phase of negotiations by giving concrete examples of what a just transition for waste pickers can look like at different points in the plastic value chain, from production reduction and re-use, to waste management and finance. Within and beyond the treaty, this letter seeks to direct negotiators towards best practice where waste pickers are registered, organised in associations and cooperatives, receive adequate remuneration for their environmental services and are able to move up the plastics value chain. It also recognises the limits of labour formalisation and the need to maintain entry points for those waste pickers that remain largely in the informal economy. Finally, highlighting the importance of organising and waste pickers' capacity and experience in receiving and managing major financing, the letter also points to the necessity of ensuring direct access to finance in the treaty's financial mechanism, a move that will also benefit Indigenous Peoples and other affected communities and stakeholders.

Since the UN negotiations to develop a treaty to end plastic pollution began in Punta del Este in late 2022, over 125 million tonnes of plastic have entered the environment, with 25 million of those added since negotiations at INC5 in Busan ended without an agreement last year (Cottom et al., 2024). While negotiators haggle over brackets and articles, landing zones and red lines, plastic production and pollution have continued unabated. So too has the work of up to 40 million waste pickers worldwide, who play a crucial role in mitigating such pollution and are responsible for the collection of up to 58% of plastic waste that is subsequently recycled (Lau et al., 2020; Cook et al., 2024). Waste pickers can be defined as 'workers in informal, semi-formal, or cooperative settings involved in the collection, sorting, transporting, and commercialisation of discarded materials for recycling or reuse', a definition adopted by the International Alliance of Waste Pickers (IAWP) that should be embedded in the treaty.

Waste picker leaders have been a vocal and visible presence at the plastics treaty talks, taking time off from their day-to-day labour to advocate for a just transition that will ensure that workers in the plastics value chain are not left behind. In conference centres and lobbies, member state delegates often met waste pickers for the first time and realised that they exist in all regions of the world, rich and poor, developed and developing. Waste pickers have been fundamental in advocating for a treaty provision on Just Transition (O'Hare and Nøklebye, 2024), which is also mentioned in the Waste Management article of the most recent Chair's text, which will be used as the basis for negotiations at INC5.2 in Geneva in August.

An ambitious plastics treaty that reduces plastic production and reconfigures waste management without putting in place proper safeguards and just transition provisions leaves the livelihoods of millions at risk. More disastrous, however, for humanity and the environment, would be a failure to reach an agreement in Geneva and the continuation of the status quo, where waste pickers receive scant reward and little social protection for the outsized role that they play in recovering millions of tonnes of plastic annually.

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Waste pickers are clearly not the only Global Plastics Treaty (GPT) stakeholder who should be contemplated with regard to a just transition. A fair deal must be ensured for any workers who stand to lose their jobs or lose out as part of an agreement, and this includes livelihood improvement, creation, transformation or substitution if necessary. Indigenous Peoples, who often bear the brunt of both pollution created at the hydrocarbon extraction phase of the plastics life cycle and inadequate waste management, also need a just transition away from plastic pollution that recognises their rights and role in environmental stewardship and ecosystem services. Nevertheless, waste pickers, as the most vulnerable actors in the plastics value chain and the last frontier in preventing plastic pollution, have rightly been acknowledged as a key and necessary beneficiary of a just transition provision.

What does a just transition look like for waste pickers in the context of the Global Plastics Treaty (GPT)? In many ways, this will depend on the final treaty text and the strategies prioritised to tackle plastic pollution. Waste pickers agree that upstream measures, including a reduction in the production of virgin plastic polymers, will be a necessary and effective part of ending plastic pollution. Should plastics that waste pickers rely on for their livelihood be banned, then a just transition would mean ensuring that they are not disadvantaged by such a move. For instance, the replacement of Polyethylene bags by bio-based alternatives has proved problematic with regard to established recycling chains and composting systems. Since there is currently little market value for such bags, and in order to promote their collection and separation where formal waste management services are inexistent, waste pickers could be paid an environmental service fee for their collection and transformation. Some bio-based plastics can also be processed using traditional recycling machinery – Colombian waste pickers have experimented with the extrusion of corn-based carrier bags – while others are more appropriate for composting with organic waste, an area of waste disposal that waste picker organisations have started to become involved in.

A rebalancing of our economies away from disposability and towards reuse also provides opportunities and challenges for waste pickers, who currently play an important role in recovering for reuse materials such as textiles, electronics, furniture and even reusable takeaway containers (Saltalippi and Luppi, *forthcoming*). If the reuse rather than the recycling of packaging becomes more common, as was traditionally the case and as is promoted through practices such as 'zero waste' shops and stalls, then waste pickers could potentially lose out. Reuse and refill systems should be based on existing recycling systems such that waste pickers can continue accessing and commercialising materials. This brings greater convenience to consumers and higher material recovery rates, as we see in the present day recycling. A just transition strategy in this instance could also build on existing examples of formalisation and integrate waste pickers into return loops, either through incentivising their collection of re-usables or by employing waste pickers directly in reuse hubs. Lessons in this regard could be drawn from events like music festivals and sports matches, many of which have trialled both a switch to reusables and the employment of waste pickers in waste management services, as can be seen in the case of Hasiru Dala's zero waste event services in Bangalore, India (Kalra and Manasi, 2020).

The transformation, extension and formalisation of waste management also bring about the need for just transition policies for waste pickers. The latter are exposed to plastic pollution in their livelihoods but also because they can usually be numbered amongst the roughly 2 billion people who do not have access to waste collection services (Wilson and Velis, 2015). Uncollected plastic

waste or that disposed of in waterways can block drainage systems and cause devastating flooding (Cooper and Letsinger, 2023). Funding for an expansion of waste collection services to all residents, including those in informal settlements, should be assured under the treaty as a way of capturing plastics that are currently disposed of by open burning and dumping and undermine human and environmental health. Waste pickers can benefit from such an expansion, not only by being provided with services but also by providing waste services themselves, in their own neighbourhoods and others. Grassroots waste picker organisations are already doing this in cities like Nairobi, Pune and Portland.

Investments in improving waste management systems have often centred around a shift from open dumping to sanitary landfill or incineration. There is currently a renewed threat of landfill closure or exclusion without a just transition globally. Any promotion of these waste disposal technologies in the plastics treaty needs to align not only with best environmental practice but also with best practice as regards the integration and protection of waste pickers. Whilst incinerators have historically been the largest technological threat to waste picker livelihoods, a transition to sanitary landfills without a just transition for waste pickers can put thousands out of work (O'Hare, 2022). Waste pickers excluded from such spaces need to be provided with alternative means of exercising their profession and accessing waste, such as door-to-door segregated collection, agreements with commercial and large waste generators and employment in sorting plants. We must also accept, however, that not all waste pickers will be able to adapt to formal scheduled work, so it will be important to retain entry points for independent workers and focus formalisation efforts on the facilitation of registration with attached benefits and support workers to achieve formalisation through their own cooperatives and associations.

Another key demand for waste pickers is to be able to advance in plastics value chains so as to improve their incomes and working conditions, up-skill and tackle structural vulnerability. In many countries, waste pickers have organised in cooperatives and associations in order to obtain a better price for their materials or be paid a service or handling fee (Gutberlet, 2021). In Colombia, they have advanced across the whole value chain for some plastic products, like plastic lumber, from collection and separation through various mechanical and industrial processes (agglutination and extrusion) to the design of products and even the construction of 'plastic houses'. One factor that has made this possible is that waste picker organisations benefit from a share of household water and waste rates (Parra and Abizaid, 2021) and have used a portion of these funds to invest in industrial machinery, infrastructure and systems for traceability and transparency. This can be cited as an example of appropriate technology transfer that has aided waste labour instead of replacing it, resulting in the creation of quality jobs for waste pickers who now earn a regular wage instead of working on the streets and being exposed to the vagaries of the weather and the market. It has also brought new challenges, such as ensuring that waste pickers are given adequate PPE in order to minimise exposure to microplastics and plastic chemicals, something that would also be aided by chemical simplification and the removal of hazardous chemicals in plastics.

All of these initiatives cost money. However, this is a payment that for the most part is long overdue, given the 'triple impact' of the social, economic, and environmental services that waste pickers provide. For this reason, it is essential that just transition is mentioned in the treaty article on finance and that direct access to finance is built into the treaty's DNA, something that will benefit not only waste pickers but other key stakeholders such as

Indigenous Peoples too (Tearfund/IAWP, 2025). A bespoke financial mechanism for the treaty is needed, and one where the private sector also makes Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) contributions for the plastics that they release onto the market. For most of their lives, waste pickers have had to deal with intermediaries, not only when trying to sell recyclable materials to industry but also when trying to access funding. In the best-case scenario, NGOs have allied with waste pickers who do not have the administrative or legal capacity to receive funds. However, this has often meant that these organisations receive a significant amount of allocated funds, with a variable amount trickling down to waste pickers.

Technical staff continue to play a fundamental role for the waste picker movement, but in many countries, an educated next generation of waste pickers has assumed administrative and management as well as leadership roles. Waste picker organisations have also been the recipients of large grants and, with adequate financial training, have been able to make sure that this money gets to the waste pickers who need it most, putting it to work in ways that benefit waste pickers, their communities, and the wider environment. For instance, between 2021 and 2025, almost US\$3 million has been channelled directly to waste picker organisations in Latin America through Latitud-R (previously the Regional Recycling Initiative). More broadly, the best way to ensure that waste pickers benefit from waste management and plastic pollution policies is to include them in the design, implementation and oversight of those policies and not merely as a beneficiary or afterthought, an approach that the GPT can include as best practice.

In these times of global instability and injustice, now more than ever there is a need to prove that multilateral diplomacy can work. The hours, days, and weeks that member state delegates and observers have spent poring over brackets and commas should not be in vain. We need to turn off the tap of global plastic pollution and also ensure that the environmental heroes that ensure that at least some of our plastics are recycled are adequately recognised and remunerated and benefit from a just transition. Hopefully it will be sooner rather than later that the benefits of an ambitious and just plastics treaty are felt by waste pickers on landfills, sorting plants and streets, as national governments adopt best practices. The first step will be a landmark agreement in Geneva that defines waste pickers clearly and includes a mandatory provision on just transition, supported by a designated finance mechanism accessible to waste pickers and other impacted stakeholders.

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