

Policy Guidelines for the Promotion of Decent Work in Recycling

In December 2025, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted the [Policy guidelines for the promotion of decent work in recycling](#), which had been negotiated between governments, workers and employers during the meeting of experts held in May of 2025. The International Alliance of Waste Pickers (IAWP) took part in these negotiations and, together with WIEGO, put together this document outlining the sections and themes of key importance for waste pickers in the guidelines.

<p>1. Mapping references to waste pickers using the following descriptors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Waste pickers · Recycling workers · Informal economy / informal workers · Informal recycling workers · Manual waste-picking · Cooperatives / social and solidarity economy (when clearly referring to waste pickers) 		
Direct Quote	Category that reference waste pickers	Complementary Analysis
<p>Paragraph 6</p> <p>“Recycling today comprises a highly heterogeneous and diverse range of activities across all sectors of the economy, from manual waste-picking to the collection and recovery of waste, all the way to digitally enabled industrial symbiosis in the pharmaceutical industry.”</p>	<p>Explicit reference to manual waste-picking.</p>	<p>Establishes waste picking as an integral and legitimate form of recycling work, not a residual or marginal activity.</p> <p>Anchors informal, manual recycling within the definition of the sector itself.</p>

<p>Paragraph 8</p> <p>“While it [recycling] can contribute to environmental objectives, some recycling activities can contaminate the environment, and many enterprises and workers in recycling operate in conditions of structural informality, often in poor working conditions and are therefore unable to realize their full potential and aspirations for green and decent jobs.”</p>	<p>Recycling workers in conditions of structural informality.</p>	<p>Clear diagnosis of informality as a structural condition, not individual failure.</p> <p>Apply directly to waste pickers and informal recyclers.</p>
<p>Paragraph 10- “Advancing social justice, including the protection and realization of fundamental principles and rights at work, is key to ensuring that workers involved in recycling activities and operations can pursue their livelihoods and carry out their jobs in conditions of equality, freedom, safety, health, social security and dignity.”</p>		
<p>Paragraph 12</p> <p>“These guidelines are intended to apply to all recycling operations, whether publicly or privately operated, in the formal and the informal economy, at the regional, national, local and sectoral levels.”</p>	<p>Informal economy (explicit).</p>	<p>Removes any ambiguity: informal recycling work falls fully under the scope of the Guidelines.</p>

<p>Paragraph 13</p> <p>“Although informal and formal recycling activities coexist and intersect with one another in recycling value chains, these policy guidelines have been drafted with special attention to recycling enterprises and workers in the informal economy. This is not only because of their large numbers but also because of the mandate of the ILO and the rest of the United Nations system to advance social justice and ensure that no one is left behind.”</p>	<p>workers in the informal economy (Explicit priority)</p>	<p>This is the strongest political anchor for waste pickers in the entire document.</p> <p>Establishes affirmative prioritization, not neutral inclusion.</p>
<p>Paragraph 15</p> <p>“These policy guidelines are intended for use by: “...recycling workers and workers’ organizations representing them; social and solidarity economy entities, including cooperatives, and other organizations of recycling workers...”</p>	<p>Recycling workers Cooperatives / SSE (explicit, worker-linked)</p>	<p>Explicitly recognizes cooperatives and SSE entities as organizations of recycling workers, not merely enterprises.</p> <p>Covers waste picker cooperatives and associations directly.</p>
<p>Paragraph 16(a)</p> <p>“Governments have the duty to adopt, progressively implement and enforce national laws and regulations, and to ensure that the fundamental principles and rights at work and ratified ILO Conventions and Protocols protect and</p>	<p>Recycling workers (universal).</p>	<p>Establishes that all recycling workers, regardless of employment status, are rights holders.</p> <p>Implicitly includes informal workers and waste pickers.</p>

<p>are applied to all workers in recycling...”</p>		
<p>Paragraph 67</p> <p>“Informality poses a major challenge for the enforcement of legislation, the growth of sustainable, productive and efficient enterprises, the improvement of the livelihoods and working conditions of waste pickers and other informal workers, and the realization of their rights at work and social protection for all.”</p>	<p>Waste pickers (explicit)</p> <p>Informal workers (explicit)</p>	<p>Confirms waste pickers as a specific subgroup within informal recycling workers</p> <p>Established need for formalization, which includes social protection for all.</p>
<p>Paragraph 67 (continued)</p> <p>“Women, young people, migrants and other categories of workers who are disadvantaged in the labour market are overrepresented among informal recycling workers.”</p>	<p>Informal recycling workers (explicit).</p>	<p>Supports gender- and inclusion-sensitive approaches for waste pickers.</p> <p>Reinforces vulnerability-based prioritization.</p>
<p>Paragraph 122</p> <p>“A common characteristic of recycling in the informal economy is the absence of a direct employment relationship between the workers concerned and the employer for whom they perform work.”</p>	<p>Informal recycling workers (implicit).</p>	<p>Describes precisely the employment reality of most waste pickers.</p> <p>Prepares or suggests a context that needs adapted protection and regulation.</p>

<p>Paragraph 126</p> <p>“For recycling workers, working hours can be excessive due to such factors as the irregularity of recycling work in some value chains, low incomes or the requirements of the job. Some waste pickers work at night, while many work alone and in isolation.”</p>	<p>Waste pickers (explicit)</p>	<p>Direct recognition of specific working conditions of waste pickers.</p> <p>Grounds later provisions on OSH, hours of work and protection.</p>
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<p>2. Mapping Section: Cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy</p>		
<p>Paragraph 44</p> <p>“Cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy entities play an important role in promoting decent work and have improved the living and working conditions of recycling workers in many countries, especially those vulnerable to the most serious decent work deficits in the informal economy. Social and solidarity economy entities put into practice a set of values that are intrinsic to their functioning and are consistent with care for people and the planet, equality and fairness, interdependence, self-governance, transparency and</p>	<p>Recycling workers</p> <p>Informal economy</p> <p>Cooperatives / SSE (explicit)</p>	<p>It directly acknowledges that: 1) cooperatives improve living and working conditions; 2) their impact is particularly relevant for vulnerable workers in the informal economy.</p> <p>This paragraph unequivocally covers cooperatives of organized waste pickers.</p>

<p>accountability, and the attainment of decent work and livelihoods.”</p>		
<p>Paragraph 47(c) “Governments should, in consultation with employers’ and workers’ organizations: ... (c) ensure a level playing field by treating social and solidarity economy recycling entities in accordance with national law and practice and on terms that are no less favourable than those accorded to other forms of enterprise.”</p>	<p>Cooperatives / SSE Recycling entities (explicit)</p>	<p>Recognizes that SSE entities in recycling should not be discriminated against. Explicitly protects waste picker cooperatives from: 1) exclusive privatization, 2) regulatory biases, 3) unequal bidding.</p>
<p>Paragraph 48(c) “Employers’ organizations should: (c) consider facilitating the access of social and solidarity economy entities to business networks and partners that can contribute to their development, enhance their business potential, entrepreneurial and managerial capacities, strengthen their productivity and competitiveness, and facilitate their access to international markets and institutional funding.”</p>	<p>Social and solidarity economy entities (explicit) in the context of recycling (implicit), which include waste picker organizations created within the SSE (implicit)</p>	<p>Recognizes structural barriers faced by social and solidarity economy entities (including waste picker cooperatives) in terms of access to 1) markets, 2) capital, and 3) networks. This legitimizes the need for specific support policies.</p>

<p>Paragraph 152 (f)</p> <p>“Governments should: (...) (f) promote the establishment and growth of cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy entities by creating a level playing field in terms of the legal and administrative framework governing their formation and operation, consistent with the guidance provided in Recommendation No. 193. Empowering entrepreneurs, employers and workers in different recycling value chains and operations to organize into formal associations, such as social and solidarity economy entities and other membership-based organizations, including women- and youth-led organizations and networks, may increase their capacity to effectively engage in industrial relations and contribute to improved productivity, working conditions and decent work.”</p>	<p>Cooperatives / SSE entities /formal associations / Other member Ship-based Organizations (explicit)</p> <p>Recycling workers (implicit, strong)</p> <p>Informal workers (implicit)</p>	<p>It explicitly recognizes collective organization as a means to: 1) improve working conditions, 2) participate in labor relations, 3) strengthen productivity.</p> <p>It explicitly recognizes the need for regulatory frameworks that are favorable to and promote “organization”, particularly in SSE entities and with a special focus on young people and women.</p>
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<p>Paragraph 23(i)</p> <p>“Governments should: (i) leverage public procurement to optimize decent work opportunities in waste management and recycling, including by providing support to MSMEs and cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy entities to enable them to participate in tendering processes...”</p>	<p>MSMEs and cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy entities (explicit)</p>	<p>Enables inclusive public procurement.</p> <p>Direct basis for the inclusion of waste picker cooperatives in municipal recycling systems.</p> <p>It explicitly recognizes the need for regulatory frameworks that are favorable to and promote “organization,” particularly in SSE entities. Suggests the route of public “tendering and contracting.”</p>
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<p>3. Mapping Section: Formalization</p>		
<p>Paragraph 65</p> <p>“Formalization means ensuring that all economic activities by workers and economic units – including enterprises, entrepreneurs and households – are, in law and in practice, sufficiently covered by formal arrangements.”</p>	<p>Workers (general)</p> <p>Informal economy (implicit)</p>	<p>It explicitly includes households and entrepreneurs, categories that encompass self-employed waste pickers.</p>

<p>Paragraph 66</p> <p>“There are elevated levels of informal employment in recycling and other loops of the circular economy, especially in and around the cities of lower-income countries. Low public spending, insufficient provision of quality public services and limited access to these are key drivers of informality, along with low productivity of enterprises and challenges of compliance. Microlevel determinants such as low levels of education, as well as discrimination, poverty, lack of access to economic resources, finances and property and low levels of organization, can also lead workers to informal work.”</p>	<p>Informal employment</p> <p>Recycling workers (implicit)</p>	<p>It positions informality as a structural characteristic of the sector, not as an anomaly.</p> <p>It describes typical conditions of informal urban recycling, where waste pickers are located.</p> <p>Emphasizes the importance of organizing for overcoming informality.</p>
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<p>Paragraph 67</p> <p>“Informality poses a major challenge for the enforcement of legislation, the growth of sustainable, productive and efficient enterprises, the improvement of the livelihoods and working conditions of waste pickers and other informal workers, and the realization of their rights at work and social protection for all. Women, young people, migrants and other categories of workers who are disadvantaged in the labour market are overrepresented among informal recycling workers.”</p>	<p>Waste pickers (explicit)</p> <p>Informal workers</p> <p>Informal recycling workers</p>	<p>It explicitly recognizes waste pickers as 1) individuals affected by informality, 2) holders of labor and social protection rights. 3) It links informality with structural inequality.</p>
<p>Paragraph 67 (continued)</p> <p>“The formalization of recycling, through integrated policy approaches, is therefore of critical importance to ensuring an inclusive and just transition to environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all, and to the circular economy for the creation of decent jobs.”</p>	<p>Recycling workers (implicit)</p> <p>Waste pickers (implicit)</p>	<p>Formalization is presented as a condition for a just transition, not as a sanction.</p> <p>It implies that the ecological transition must include waste pickers, not displace them.</p>

<p>Page 50 – Paragraph 68(a–b)</p> <p>“Governments, in consultation with employers’ and workers’ organizations, should:</p> <p>(a) undertake a thorough assessment of the characteristics and drivers of informality, including by collecting statistics on the workforce and economic units, reviewing legal and policy frameworks and practice, and considering the decent work deficits in recycling;</p> <p>(b) develop and implement an integrated policy framework and establish strategies and incentives to facilitate the transition to the formal economy in recycling, ... taking into account the diversity of actors and be tailored to context-specific drivers of informality.”</p>	<p>Informal economy</p> <p>Recycling workers (implicit)</p>	<p>Formalization is presented as a condition for a just transition, in need of incentives, not as a sanction.</p> <p>It implies that the ecological transition must include waste pickers, not displace them.</p>
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<p>Paragraph 68(f–h)</p> <p>“Governments ... should: (f) strengthen OSH and labour inspection and mechanisms to promote compliance with national laws and regulations, ensuring that the recognition and enforcement of employment relationships in recycling applies to the informal economy as well, and extend the mandate and capacity of labour inspection to cover SSE entities, informal and unregistered sectors; (g) create an enabling environment for employers and workers to exercise their right to organize and bargain collectively; (h) foster social dialogue in the design and implementation of strategies for the transition to the formal economy.”</p>	<p>Informal economy</p> <p>Recycling workers</p> <p>SSE entities (explicit)</p>	<p>It links formalization with organization and social dialogue.</p> <p>It explicitly applies labor inspection and OSH to the informal economy, but ignores the contexts in which informal employment organizations operate and the difficulty of complying with labor standards, and the difficulty of labor inspection in some informal workers contexts.</p>
<p>Paragraph 68(i)</p> <p>“Ensure access to adequate social protection coverage for all workers in recycling and, taking into account national circumstances, make social protection systems more sustainable, inclusive and effective, as enablers of formalization strategies</p>	<p>Recycling workers</p> <p>Informal workers (implicit)</p>	<p>Formalization does not precede social protection: they reinforce each other.</p> <p>Strengthen the right of informal waste pickers to social protection.</p>

4. Mapping section on Social protection, working conditions, OSH and violence		
<p>Paragraph 68(i)</p> <p>Governments, in consultation with employers' and workers' organizations, should</p> <p>"Ensure access to adequate social protection coverage for all workers in recycling and, taking into account national circumstances, make social protection systems more sustainable, inclusive and effective.."</p>	<p>all workers in recycling (explicit)</p>	<p>It establishes that social protection does not depend on formal employment.</p> <p>It applies directly to waste pickers, self-employed workers, and cooperative members.</p>
<p>Paragraph 138. The provision of welfare and well-being facilities in recycling varies considerably, but conditions are generally better for workers in formal employment at large establishments than for workers in informal enterprises and own-account workers on streets and dumpsites where facilities are often non-existent. Most informal workers in recycling do not have access to sufficient welfare and well-being facilities. For some recycling workers,</p>	<p>workers in informal enterprises and own-account workers on streets and dumpsites (explicit)</p>	<p>It takes stock of different categories that describe the contexts and working conditions of waste pickers.</p>

<p>living and working conditions are inseparable.</p>		
<p>Paragraph 122</p> <p>“A common characteristic of recycling in the informal economy is the absence of a direct employment relationship between the workers concerned and the employer for whom they perform work.”</p>	<p>Informal economy (explicit)</p>	<p>Accurately describes the predominant labor model of waste pickers.</p> <p>Indirectly justifies the need for social protection approaches that are not based on wage labor.</p>
<p>Paragraph 126</p> <p>“For recycling workers, working hours can be excessive due to such factors as the irregularity of recycling work in some value chains, low incomes or the requirements of the job. Some waste pickers work at night, while many work alone and in isolation.”</p>	<p>Waste pickers (explicit)</p>	<p>Textual recognition of specific conditions lacking OSH: Night work, or work during non-standard hours, isolation, irregular working hours.</p> <p>Direct basis for justifying “special” regulatory and protective measures.</p>
<p>Paragraph 111</p> <p>Governments, in consultation with employee organizations, should:</p> <p>(b) establish or strengthen national OSH policies, programmes and systems that afford protection for all workers recycling, regardless of nationality, age, gender, disability or other status,</p> <p>(i) ensure the provision of adequate OSH services for</p>	<p>all workers recycling (explicit)</p> <p>all waste and recycling workers (explicit)</p>	<p>It reinforces the state's obligation to provide</p>

<p>all waste and recycling workers</p>		
<p>Paragraph 143</p> <p>“Among recycling workers, unorganized and informal waste pickers working on landfill sites and the streets are especially exposed to violence and harassment, including by law enforcement authorities, private security actors and criminal groups.”</p>	<p>Waste pickers (explicit)</p> <p>Informal workers (explicit)</p>	<p>Direct recognition of structural violence.</p> <p>Includes institutional and police violence.</p> <p>Solid regulatory basis for human rights advocacy.</p>
<p>Paragraph 143 (continued)</p> <p>“They may face arrest, confiscation of materials, sexual harassment and other forms of abuse while performing their work.”</p>	<p>Waste pickers (explicit)</p>	<p>Recognizes specific practices historically denounced by waste picker movements.</p>

5. Mapping Social dialogue and tripartism section

<p>Section 5 opening paragraph</p> <p>Social dialogue is crucial for forging a consensus on pathways towards decent work in recycling and the circular economy. Strong, independent and effective labour administrations and inspectorates as well as employers' and workers' organizations are a prerequisite for fostering social dialogue, promoting decent work in recycling, and ensuring a just transition to the broader circular economy.</p>	<p>Recycling workers (implicit)</p>	<p>Inserts the recycling sector into the classic ILO tripartite framework. (all types of negotiation)</p> <p>Conceptual basis for including waste picker organizations in institutional processes: Social dialogue is a precondition for the existence of decent work</p>
<p>Paragraph 73. "...Social dialogue, including collective bargaining, at the enterprise, local, sectoral and national levels is key for assessing the opportunities and resolving the challenges posed by the transition and Policy guidelines for the promotion of decent work in recycling ensuring that it becomes better managed and will work to the benefit of all..."</p>		<p>It includes recycling workers, including those in the informal economy, because it recognizes social dialogue at enterprise, local, sectoral and national levels reflecting the multi-level structure of recycling systems where these workers operate and organize.</p> <p>By affirming social dialogue (including collective bargaining) as key to managing the transition, it establishes that decent work in recycling cannot be achieved without the active participation and voice of recycling workers, including</p>

		those in the informal economy, in shaping the policies that affect their livelihoods.
<p>Paragraph 151</p> <p>“Social dialogue in recycling should involve representative organizations of recycling workers, including organizations of recycling workers in the informal economy, as well as employers’ organizations and governments.”</p>	<p>Recycling workers (explicit)</p> <p>including organizations of recycling workers in the informal economy (explicit)</p>	<p>Direct recognition of informal waste pickers’ organizations.</p> <p>Legitimizes cooperatives, associations, and networks as actors in social dialogue.</p> <p>Extends the scope of tripartism beyond formal employment.</p>
<p>Paragraph 161.</p> <p>Governments, in consultation with employers’ and workers’ organizations, should: (f) adapt and redesign policies in order to ensure that labour administration services cover all categories of workers and adequately address their specific needs with respect to collective labour relations and decent work. This includes progressively extending services to workers in the informal economy to support their formalization and in non-standard forms of employment, strengthening capacity for social dialogue with the most representative organizations of employers and workers.</p>	<p>workers in the informal economy (explicit)</p>	<p>Establishes that labour administration services must cover all categories of workers, explicitly including those in the informal economy and in non-standard forms of employment.</p> <p>Recognizes the need to adapt and redesign policies to address the specific realities and needs of these workers, supporting progressive formalization rather than imposing uniform regulatory approaches.</p> <p>Reinforces the obligation to strengthen social dialogue with the most representative workers’ organizations, thereby legitimizing organizations of informal recycling workers as institutional interlocutors</p>

		in the pursuit of decent work
<p>Paragraph 106 Governments, in consultation with employers' and workers' organizations, should:</p> <p>C) ensure that social dialogue and other consultation processes related to recycling support the participation of groups that are vulnerable and at risk, and strengthen the capacity of at-risk groups to effectively participate through the most representative employers' and workers' organizations;</p>	<p>groups that are vulnerable and at risk (indirectly waste pickers)</p> <p>The most representative [...] workers' organizations</p>	<p>It mandates that social dialogue in recycling must actively include vulnerable and at-risk groups, not only established formal actors.</p> <p>It recognizes that participation requires capacity-building, not just formal invitation.</p> <p>It channels participation through the most representative workers' organizations, reinforcing institutional legitimacy for organizations of informal recycling workers.</p>
<p>Paragraph 152. Governments, in consultation with employers' and workers' organizations, should:</p> <p>a. actively promote and engage in social dialogue when implementing the recommendations included in these guidelines, at all stages from policy design to implementation and evaluation and at all levels from global, regional, national, sectoral and local to enterprise levels...</p>)	<p>Highly relevant for waste pickers and their organizations because it recognizes the scales and the fact that recycling is organized territorially.</p> <p>It enables participation at the municipal level and in sectoral waste management processes.</p>

<p>Paragraph 152. (b) develop and implement integrated policies to promote the establishment, growth and effective functioning of the organizations of employers and workers in recycling, to ensure their participatory voice and contribution to socio-economic development and a just transition to environmental sustainability and the circular economy. These policies should respond to the particular challenges of recycling and take full account of the legal and practical implications of outsourced, temporary and migrant workers, organizations of employers and workers in recycling</p>	<p>organizations [...] workers in recycling (Including those in informal economy)</p> <p>organizations of employers and workers in recycling (explicit)</p>	<p>It mandates governments to actively support the creation, growth and effective functioning of employers' and workers' organizations in recycling, not merely recognize them.</p> <p>It links these organizations directly to participatory voice, socio-economic development and a just transition to environmental sustainability and the circular economy.</p> <p>It requires policies to address the specific structural challenges of the recycling sector, acknowledging its distinct characteristics.</p> <p>It explicitly considers the legal and practical implications of outsourced, temporary and migrant workers, broadening protection beyond standard employment relationships.</p> <p>It reinforces the institutional legitimacy of recycling workers' organizations as key actors in shaping transition and development policies.</p>
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<p>(e) . establish new, or strengthen existing, social dialogue mechanisms and take appropriate measures to ensure that employers' and workers' organizations are genuinely involved in social dialogue at all levels.</p> <p>Such action includes ensuring that employers and workers are not only able, through organizations of their own choosing, to contribute to externally initiated proposals, but are also able to participate actively and propose measures, programmes and activities that shape their socio-economic situation. Participation extends beyond mere consultation and should lead to concrete ownership of initiatives by and for recycling workers. The involvement of women and young people in negotiations and other decision-making bodies and processes should also be encouraged;</p>	<p>workers' organizations (including those of workers in the informal economy)</p>	<p>It requires governments to ensure genuine involvement of employers' and workers' organizations in social dialogue at all levels, moving beyond symbolic participation.</p> <p>It affirms that recycling workers must not only respond to externally designed proposals but also actively shape policies, programmes and initiatives, ensuring real ownership.</p> <p>It promotes inclusive participation, explicitly encouraging the involvement of women and young people in decision-making and negotiation processes.</p>
<p>Mapping the sections on just transition</p>		

<p>Section 2.9 Title: A just transition towards a job-rich circular economy...</p> <p>Paragraph 69. A just transition maximizes the social and economic opportunities of climate and environmental action in a way that is inclusive, by creating decent work opportunities, reducing inequality and by leaving no one behind</p>	<p>leaving no one behind (Including workers in the informal economy)</p>	<p>Job-rich” is crucial because it frames the circular economy as a generator of decent work opportunities, meaning that environmental transition must create and expand livelihoods not eliminate existing jobs held by waste pickers</p> <p>“Leaving no one behind” explicitly anchors the transition in an inclusion principle, which directly protects informal workers in the recycling industry from displacement and affirms their right to be integrated into the benefits of climate and circular economy policies.</p>
<p>Paragraph 72.</p> <p>Coherent policies to provide a just transition framework for all and promote the creation of more decent jobs should include as appropriate: anticipating impacts on employment, adequate and sustainable social protection for job losses and displacement, skills development and social dialogue, including the effective exercise of the right to organize and bargain collectively.</p>	<p>Recycling workers, including those in the informal economy, are included because the paragraph applies to “all” workers affected by transition policies and explicitly addresses job loss, displacement, social protection and social dialogue , all of which are directly relevant to landfill closures and waste system reforms.</p>	<p>This is crucial for recycling workers, as it requires governments to anticipate employment impacts, provide social protection and skills development, and ensure meaningful social dialogue before implementing policies that could otherwise displace or exclude them.</p>

