

What can waste pickers gain from the new ILO Guidelines for the promotion of decent work in recycling?

“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”

- ILO 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) and Women in Informal Economy: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) were invited by the International Trade Union Confederation, IndustriALL Global Union and Public Services International to include three representatives to serve as worker advisers at the meeting.

The week-long negotiations were tiring and intense, lasting late into the night and not concluding until nearly 2 am on the final day. Critical debates took place between governments, workers and employers around a range of issues related to decent work, including whether the sector should be ‘job-rich’, competitive, and inclusive of ‘living wages’. While it was not possible to include all of IAWP’s demands in the guidelines, we were able to influence them to reflect many of the needs and demands of waste pickers, and the resulting document contains important and detailed contributions to the framing of decent work in our sector.

In the ILO guidelines, the term “recycling workers in the informal economy ” is referred to by different terms depending on the context, reflecting the diversity of their work and organisational structures. The IAWP uses the term “waste pickers” as an inclusive term that can encompass informal recycling workers, recyclers, or recycling workers in the informal economy.¹ In these guidelines, various terms are also used to refer to waste pickers , and while not all workers in the informal recycling economy are waste pickers, it is important to note that the majority of them are.

¹ The International Alliance of Waste Pickers defines waste pickers to include own account workers in collecting, sorting, classifying and selling recyclable materials; street-based waste pickers and other informal or semi-formal workers involved in the transport, recovery and commercialization of these materials, including those integrated into municipal waste management systems; as well as former waste pickers who, within their organizations, have taken on new roles in areas such as environmental promotion, care work, health or gender programmes. See: www.wastepickersinternational.org/constitution for IAWP’s full definition of waste pickers.

What to know about the ILO's guidelines for decent work in recycling?

The ILO Guidelines represent a monumental step forward by declaring that recycling is real work and that waste pickers are workers with full rights. The document recognises the need to guarantee our access to social protection, safe working conditions, fair income, and the freedom to organise. It acknowledges the pivotal role of recyclers' cooperatives and organisations as legitimate stakeholders within the sector. Furthermore, it states that formalisation must not destroy their livelihoods but rather integrate them step by step, and that the transition to a circular economy must create jobs without leaving anyone behind. Social dialogue remains at the core: recyclers must have a voice in the policies that affect them. In short, this is a powerful tool enabling them to claim our rightful place in waste management.

The ILO Guidelines for decent work in the recycling sector are not just a technical document — they are a tool that can and should be used by waste picker organisations and our leaders. It is worth reviewing them in light of local and national realities, asking to what extent the standards set are being met and where important gaps remain. Based on this, waste pickers can help strengthen demands, guide proposals, and hold authorities accountable for ensuring rights, improving working conditions, and enabling meaningful inclusion in recycling systems. In this way, the guidelines can become a concrete reference point for advancing, through collective organisation, towards more dignified and just working conditions.

Key principles that can be found within the guidelines include:

1. Recycling is real work

The ILO recognises recycling as a legitimate work activity, encompassing everything from street collection to industrial processing. This places waste pickers —whether working in landfills or on the streets—firmly on the global labour map, dispelling the notion that we are merely "informal actors operating outside the system."

2. Coverage of workers in the informal economy

The guidelines are intended to apply equally to recycling operations in both the formal and informal economy, with a particular emphasis on recycling enterprises and workers in the informal economy. This emphasis reflects not only the fact that the majority of waste pickers operate in the informal economy, but also the mandate of the ILO and the broader United Nations system to advance social justice and ensure that no one is left behind.

3. Labour rights for all

It affirms that recyclers are entitled to fundamental labour rights: decent working conditions, social protection, workplace safety and health, non-discrimination and freedom of association. They are thus elevated from the status of "vulnerable individuals" to that of holders of concrete, enforceable rights.

4. Cooperatives as an important pathway

It highlights cooperatives—and the broader social and solidarity economy—as ideal vehicles for transitioning toward decent work, thereby improving both incomes and collective bargaining power. Governments are urged to provide them with support.

5. Formalisation without displacement

It acknowledges that informality is a structural issue and calls for gradual processes that facilitate integration without displacing anyone through punitive measures.

6. Social protection and decent conditions

It highlights the need to guarantee access to social protection for all, recognising the harsh realities faced by waste pickers, and urging governments to design and implement adequate legal frameworks and effective mechanisms to guarantee the right to social security for all recycling workers.

7. Highlights Violence and Risks

The guidelines draw attention to exposure to violence, harassment, and hazards in streets and landfills, compelling governments, employers, and workers' organisations to adopt measures to protect them.

8. Circular Economy with Jobs

They propose a "job-rich" transition that integrates waste pickers rather than replacing them.

9. Social Dialogue with a Real Voice

The text includes collective bargaining for all, recognising waste pickers' organisations as valid interlocutors. It acknowledges that social dialogue should be based on freedom of association, conducted in good faith and include the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining for all workers, regardless of their migration status.

10. Protagonists, Not Just Beneficiaries

Finally, the ILO guidelines for the promotion of decent work in recycling position waste pickers and recycling workers as key actors in policy design, essential to fostering fairer and more sustainable recycling systems.

What are ILO sectoral guidelines?

ILO sectoral guidelines provide detailed guidance for policymakers, employers, workers, enterprises and other bodies on specific subjects pertaining to decent work and a just transition. While not legally binding, ILO guidelines are crafted to inform the language and details of legally

binding agreements such as national laws, trade or sectoral agreements, conventions, protocols and other treaties.

Sectoral guidelines draw on ILO labour standards like Conventions, Protocols and Recommendations, as well as on ILO Declarations, resolutions, conclusions and other policy guidance associated with them. They are not legally binding and not subject to ratification or supervisory mechanisms under international labour standards, but they can be used to support and strengthen labour standards and best practices within legally binding agreements and laws. For example, the [ILO's shipbreaking guidelines on safety and health for Asian countries and Turkey](#) have been referenced in policies and strategies, and used as a background document for the development of ship recycling legislation in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

In this way, ILO guidelines can be a highly useful tool for waste picker organisations. They serve to bolster the demands these groups have long been making: better working conditions, access to social protection, and inclusion in waste management systems. Having this document in hand allows them to tell an authority: "This is not merely a demand of ours; it is something the ILO is also advocating for."

They are also invaluable in dialogue settings. When meeting with municipal governments, government ministries, or private companies, these guidelines can help waste picker groups present clearer and more compelling arguments. They can be used to address issues such as service fees, access to recyclable materials, formalisation, or working conditions—backed by an authority that carries significant weight on the international stage.

Furthermore, the guidelines help organisations gain a clearer perspective on their own reality. They enable them to compare current conditions on the ground against established standards—what should be happening—and to identify where gaps exist. Based on this analysis, organisations can formulate more concrete proposals—for example, on how to improve workplace safety, how to mitigate risks, or how to strengthen their own organisational structures.

And while they do not constitute binding law, guidelines nonetheless hold significant value. They represent an international consensus regarding how the recycling sector ought to function. For this reason, they can be instrumental in amplifying the voices of recyclers, opening up avenues for dialogue, and asserting their right to participate in the decision-making processes that directly impact their work.
