

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
QUESTIONNAIRE ON
IMPLICATIONS OF PLASTIC POLLUTION FOR THE FULL ENJOYMENT OF
HUMAN RIGHTS

Background

In accordance with Human Rights Council [decision 56/117](#) of 11 July 2024, the Advisory Committee is preparing a study on the implications of plastic pollution for the full enjoyment of human rights, based on a comprehensive approach that addresses the full life cycle of plastic, to present the study to the Council at its sixty-sixth session.

The Human Rights Council requested the Advisory Committee to seek the views of and inputs from and to take into account work already done by relevant stakeholders, including States, United Nations agencies, funds and programmes within their respective mandates, international and regional organizations, OHCHR, the special procedures of the Council, the treaty bodies, national human rights institutions, Indigenous Peoples, civil society, environmental human rights defenders, the private sector, academia and scientific institutions.

The Committee would therefore welcome inputs from different stakeholders and rights-holders and encourages the submission of specific data, statistics, best practices, and significant challenges to enrich the study and provide a comprehensive analysis.

Deadline

Responses to the questionnaire can be submitted to the Secretariat of the HRC Advisory Committee **no later than 15 May 2026**, by email to OHCHR-hrcadvisorycommittee@un.org, indicating in the subject line: "Submission to the call for inputs on plastic pollution and human rights".

It is not necessary to answer all questions. You may focus on those most relevant to you/your institution/organization.

Questionnaire logistics

Please answer core questions as well as specific questions addressed to you as a stakeholder or a rights-holder. The questionnaire is distributed to you in its entirety for the purpose of transparency. Please respond as succinctly as possible and provide examples, sources and substantive information where possible. All inputs will be considered by the Advisory Committee for the sole purpose of preparing the study mandated by the Human Rights Council.

All submissions will be published on the Advisory Committee's webpage, unless they include a clear and explicit request not to be publicly disclosed.

International Alliance of Waste Pickers' response to the Human Rights Advisory Council's Questionnaire on Implications of Plastic Pollution for the Full Enjoyment of Human Rights

The International Alliance of Waste Pickers (IAWP)

The International Alliance of Waste Pickers is a democratic member-based international union of [59 waste picker organizations](#) representing more than 500,000 workers across 38 countries. IAWP is committed to advancing the rights and strengthening the organising of waste pickers around the world.

QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1. Please explain in what ways plastics affect human rights. What are the human rights impacts that you associate with the different phases of the full life-cycle of plastics (e.g., during extraction of raw materials; during production of primary plastic precursors, design and production of plastic products; during packaging and distribution; during use and maintenance; and during recycling, reuse, recovery or final disposal)? Where possible, please provide concrete data, studies, etc.**

Plastic pollution is a violation of human rights because it affects the right to a clean and healthy environment, which in turn affects the right to work. Furthermore, the dramatic rise in plastic pollution is provoking policies that are rapidly changing our informal waste and recycling sector, such that we cannot adapt quickly enough to rising competition and regulatory requirements.

Human rights violations stem from decisions made by States and corporations regarding the management of plastic waste. Generally, the State fails to recognize waste pickers as workers or providers of public services—even though, through our labor, we clean communities and assist the State in upholding the right to a healthy environment—while performing this work under precarious labor conditions. Waste pickers lack protective equipment, wages, and social security coverage. Furthermore, States often prioritize municipal cleaning services provided by private firms, thereby forcing waste pickers to compete with waste management or recycling companies for access to recyclable materials. This approach disregards the principles of equality and non-discrimination, and also contravenes the right to a life of dignity.

Waste pickers reintegrate plastics into the recycling value chain; yet, because we remain unrecognized by corporations, these companies benefit from the low cost of

materials—capitalizing on the unpaid labor involved in our work—without contributing financially to the provision of this service. This practice runs counter to the implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) grounded in a human rights perspective and violates the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Plastics themselves do not infringe on human rights; however, the lack of inclusive and appropriate regulation for plastic waste management violates waste pickers' rights to work and rights at work. In the recycling market, our work has become even more precarious due to marginal prices, toxic chemicals in the materials that we handle that affect our health and ability to work, and policies and investments that do not recognise the work we perform.

While waste pickers collect materials that would otherwise end up as pollution, we also inhabit areas that often lack adequate waste collection, violating our right to a clean and healthy environment. Thus, waste without post-consumer value (a growing share of plastic packaging and products), and without adequate incentive for its collection, pollutes our communities and degrades our health.

*Under international human rights law, states have a responsibility to **respect** waste pickers' livelihoods; **protect** us from harmful corporate practices; and **fulfill** our rights through strong labour protections, adequate social security, and inclusive plastic waste management systems. This responsibility cannot be left to the market alone. To date, public policies do not do enough to guarantee the minimum conditions necessary for us to carry out our work while enjoying our human rights.*

Please see IAWP's [research on Extended Producers Responsibility \(EPR\)](#) and [Just Transition](#) for more details about our challenges and opportunities within circular economy policy.

2. In your case, what are the main challenges slowing the progress in combating plastic pollution? List and describe them briefly.

The lack of financial incentive to collect materials and to transition to reusable products and packaging is the primary barrier to solving plastic pollution. Not only must all materials have a price attached to their recovery, so that there is adequate incentive for their collection and processing, there must be sufficient investment in the system for the infrastructure and tools to enable us to carry out our work, i.e., from accessing waste to transforming it into raw materials, reusable products, or new products.

The lack of adequate policy to address plastic pollution is also related to the influence that industry has over policy-making processes, combined with growing wealth inequality, which increases the power that the business elite has to influence policy in its favour. Environmental policies must be developed with an aim to also support the distribution of opportunity and wealth in order to ensure the human rights of those who are increasingly losing economic power in our political systems.

Exclusion of waste pickers and other vulnerable workers from policy-making processes is also a significant barrier, since waste pickers are among those first addressing plastic pollution through our work in material collection. Our exclusion from policy-making

processes leads to poorly designed policies and systems that often neglect to target the places and people most affected by plastic pollution. Being a part of this industry for generations, we believe that policy decisions should include and involve the lived experiences of workers.

Although there is a surge in the enactment of circular economy laws across various countries, in the vast majority of cases these laws merely mention waste pickers and Extended Producer Responsibility but lack implementation mechanisms that genuinely result in the inclusion of, or opportunities for, waste pickers.

Granting waste pickers the legal recognition we deserve as workers is crucial for bolstering our work in waste recovery, transport, and valorization, and reintegration into value chains—outcomes that would be reflected through improved incomes and working and living conditions, as well as in rising recycling rates worldwide.

3. What measures (legislative, administrative, institutional, or other), if any, exist to address plastics and plastic pollution? Have human rights implications been taken into account in their adoption and implementation? Are there good practices or lessons learned in regulating plastics and plastic pollution that include a human rights-based approach?

Some solid waste management and EPR policies aim to promote the social and economic integration of waste pickers into formal materials management, strengthening human rights while also improving material recovery. Some examples include India's Solid Waste Management Rules 2026; South Africa's Waste Pickers Integration Guidelines & EPR system which provides a bonus for registered waste pickers for the collection of materials; Brazil's national waste policy and presidential decree (5940/06) and reverse logistics system (including industry, government and waste picker cooperatives) mandating source segregated waste collection and sorting at the hands of waste pickers; and Colombia, which—through various rulings grounded in human rights—has recognized a series of rights that have translated into the design and implementation of policies benefiting waste pickers (affirmative measures enabling their participation in public tenders as service providers, payment for waste collection, designated routes for selective collection, as well as fair payment for the sale of collected materials, and right to social protection)¹.

4. What gaps or challenges in existing national, regional and international policies and legal frameworks have you observed? What recommendations do you have in order to address the gaps? Please, list them according to priority.

There is a misconception that anti-plastic policies would affect our income; the truth is that plastic production has tripled in recent years, but recycling rates remain low due to the lack of enforceable policies that require investment in design and value through inclusive recycling and reuse systems, as well as the reality that a growing portion of the plastics being generated have no mechanical recycling market and little/no financial incentive for their collection. More than 60% of plastics collected for recycling pass through our hands; to

¹ See examples of rights earned, including: [social protections](#), the [economic use of public space](#), and the right of waste pickers in public procurement (District Decree 564 of 2012).

fulfill waste pickers' rights, direct investment is needed to strengthen inclusive recycling schemes.

While global and national directives already exist for promoting a circular economy, their results have been limited. On the one hand, companies perceive regulation as a threat to their profitability, and often serve to influence such regulation in their favor; while on the other hand consumers fail to grasp the impact of their choices. Consequently, these measures, while sometimes ambitious and well-intentioned, have not yet yielded sufficient results—not only in reducing pollution, but also in the inclusion of waste pickers. While waste pickers are occasionally mentioned in legislation to lend an air of inclusivity to the laws, such provisions are not accompanied by commitments for funding or the implementation of models that would genuinely recognize and include waste pickers, or improve our working and living conditions. Circularity is increasingly becoming a realm of greenwashing and social washing. It is essential that human rights bodies establish standards regarding what inclusion entails within the circular economy policy—adopting a rights-based perspective—without leaving the guarantee of rights to the discretion of governments and corporations.

Furthermore, where regulations do exist, they direct resources predominantly to those actors with the existing capacity and resources to influence policy and capture opportunity. Circular economy policies like EPR generally lack recognition of labour rights, including social protections and collective bargaining. They tend to empower industry to re-organize systems and disempower labor, including through automation. Moreover, they lack a perspective of fiscal justice—one in which companies pay their fair share and which serves to redistribute wealth to the poorest workers. As we move towards a more digital and platform-based economy, we need to ensure that digital tools empower workers rather than creating new forms of exploitation. Human rights must stay at the center of any technological shift.

We need materials management policy to be more robust, by linking it with social and economic policy, including by assuring labour rights like just transition, collective bargaining, and social protections for all workers contributing to materials management systems. Furthermore, these regulations must ensure the human right to participation by requiring the involvement of different stakeholders, including waste pickers, in the design and implementation of systems.

Stronger policies are also needed to incentivise reusable products and packaging, but these policies must establish systems that build on, rather than circumvent, waste picker-based collection systems. These systems should both defend informal entry points into collection (a form of low barrier jobs which most of the time are taken by marginalised, and vulnerable folks such as Indigenous Peoples, Dalits, Women and Other Sexual Minorities), while also establishing achievable pathways to formalization for workers under waste picker organizations.

- 5. What are the particular impacts of plastics and plastic pollution on human rights of individuals, groups and peoples in vulnerable situations (e.g., marginalized communities, workers at heightened risk of occupational exposure, in particular**

waste pickers/reclaimers, peasants, people living in poverty, low-income households, children, youth, women, persons with disabilities, people of African descent, older persons, Indigenous Peoples, coastal communities), and how should these be mitigated, remediated and prevented?

The most direct impacts of plastic pollution on waste pickers include both occupational impacts associated with a lack of decent working conditions and exposure to toxic chemicals, smoke, dust, and water, as well as the health impacts from living in communities that lack adequate waste collection systems. In 2024, IAWP conducted preliminary microplastics blood tests (Plastictox tests) on a small group of waste pickers from four regions (Asia, Africa, Latin America, North America), revealing especially concerning results among those who have been working on dumpsites.

We need binding global and national obligations to ensure the: banning and active regulation of chemicals of concern; doorstep waste collection services for all residents, including those in informal settlements; waste treatment that complies with international standards for safe handling and containment; targets for mechanically recycled content and reuse of products and packaging; and a just transition such that jobs in the industry be reserved first and foremost for workers like waste pickers who have long served on the front lines of plastic pollution and its mitigation efforts.

6. To what extent does the expansion of fossil fuel extraction and petrochemical production contribute to plastic pollution? How do subsidies, tax incentives, or public financing for fossil fuel or petrochemical industries affect States' ability to meet their human rights obligations in the context of plastic pollution?

We live in a world in which subsidies exist for the production and consumption of fossil fuels used to manufacture plastics, but not for incentives that ensure their recovery, reuse and recycling. This stems in part from a lack of political will to hold polluters accountable and protect the rights of those who help mitigate the impacts of plastic pollution, [including greenhouse gas emissions](#). The petrochemical and fossil fuel industry has amassed outsized wealth and power to influence the policies intended to regulate it.

It is essential that human rights bodies carry out standard setting on tax justice for plastics producing companies, for the benefit of waste pickers. A start is the report on fiscal policies recently published by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which states: 7.3. Business activity, formalization, decent work, and the direction of public incentives: States must adopt measures to ensure that business activity contributes, in a manner compatible with human rights, to compliance with labor and social security obligations, the formalization of employment, and the reduction of informality. To that end, they must direct, as appropriate, tax incentives, subsidies, and other forms of public support toward activities that promote the formalization of employment, reduce gender and racial gaps, strengthen social security, and adopt care and shared responsibility policies. Likewise, they must avoid fiscal measures that encourage precarious employment, reduce social protection, or discourage the creation of decent work and, in contexts of crisis, consider appropriate measures to protect employment and income security. In designing these measures, States

must seek to ensure a regulatory environment compatible with their international human rights obligations, one that promotes economic formalization, the creation of decent work, and the generation of fiscal resources necessary for the progressive realization of human rights.

7. What are the measures to protect human rights in the transition to sustainable economies and societies and what lessons could be learnt from other sectors in this regard? Are there alternatives to or substitutes of plastics? What are their social and human rights implications?

Just transition for existing workers should be mandated in policy, otherwise even policies that value one human right by preventing pollution may simultaneously undermine other human rights (right to work and participation) by circumventing and displacing existing workers.

8. What are the particular impacts of plastics and plastic pollution on Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), and how should these be mitigated, remediated and prevented?

Countries in the Global South receive large quantities of plastic products and packaging, leaving the responsibility for managing them to recipient countries. Furthermore, the importation of virgin plastic resin and recycled resin that crosses borders pollutes the environment and impacts the recycling market, undermining prices and hindering the development of local markets and industries.

9. What strategies or initiatives (local, national, regional, or international) are most effective in raising awareness about human rights implications of plastics across its lifecycle, reaching out to all relevant stakeholders and rights-holders, including consumers and societies at large?

In our work, an effective strategy for raising awareness among all stakeholders, from producers to consumers, has been to engage communities through communication and outreach initiatives that place waste pickers at the centre- not by portraying waste pickers as victims, but by valuing and championing the trade. Communications campaigns that bring together stakeholders in the value chain, such as governments, municipalities, waste picker organisations, and civil society, and industry, and that are based on a work plan and not propaganda, can help promote just action. Doorstep waste collection services are an effective means of transmitting information to large segments of the population, as seen in systems around the world that have integrated waste pickers into doorstep household waste collection. This is especially important in places, like near dumpsites, where neighbors seeking an end to pollution are often potted against waste pickers, who depend on the dumpsite. Both are wrongly affected by plastic pollution in its many forms. Bringing waste pickers out of dumpsites and into doorstep waste collection is both a just transition measure, as well as a communication and community-building approach that supports both pollution mitigation and regard for human rights. Such opportunities can also incentivize better

organizing amongst waste pickers, which further extends awareness raising amongst workers about human rights.

10. What specific barriers in business conduct hinder efforts to end plastic pollution and reduce plastic production? Are there any examples on how these barriers have been addressed or overcome? What (human rights-based) minimum standards should States impose on plastic producers to hold them responsible for the entire lifecycle of their products?

The lack of monetary value (premium or market price) for materials and products that end up as waste is a major barrier to tackling plastic pollution. In some cases, these barriers are overcome when the industry puts a premium on the materials. But the premium must be sufficient to incentivise the removal of these materials from the environment. For example, in India, [SWaCH's voluntary agreement with industry](#) incentivises the collection of Multi-Layer Packaging, while the official EPR system does not adequately incentivise this collection because the price offered is so [low](#). But if the end market for these materials is co-processing and other forms of incineration or chemical recycling, such plastics are still polluting the environment and human health and should ultimately be phased out.

Minimum standards are already established under international human rights instruments that form part of the 'corpus juris' of the universal system. The right to work—including just, equitable, and satisfactory working conditions—as well as the rights to social security, public services, a dignified life, and a healthy environment, must be guaranteed for waste pickers, who constitute the first link in the recycling and reuse chain, while corporations serve as the economic beneficiaries of their labor. Furthermore, compliance with the Principles on Business and Human Rights, as well as fiscal justice standards, are essential.

Questions for civil society, Indigenous Peoples, workers and environmental human rights defenders

1. Please describe the relevant work that you have done on the issue of plastics and plastic pollution and human rights. What are the key accomplishments? What challenges has your organization faced?

The International Alliance of Waste Pickers has, over the years, led and participated in the following work that touches on the issue of human rights and plastic pollution:

- a. Participation in the Business and Human Rights Forum*
- b. Participation in UNFCCC climate change COPs*
- c. Participation in all negotiations for the development of a Global Plastics Treaty.*
- d. Extensive work, including [case studies](#) and an [official position](#), on Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and other circular economy frameworks that affect waste pickers.*

- e. *Represented workers in the ILO's negotiations to develop [guidelines for the promotion of decent work in recycling](#), and participation in International Labour Conferences.*

IAWP has influenced EPR debates in recent years, leading discourse on the ways that these policies are undermining the human right to work and participate while sometimes also neglecting the right to a clean and healthy environment. We have consistently advocated for the need for a just transition within circular economy approaches, including within the context of the UN Plastics Treaty negotiations, where an article on Just Transition remains in the draft text. Our primary challenge is in securing legal recognition for waste pickers that mandates their integration into formal materials management. Just Transition provisions must be mandated within laws in order for them to be implemented in earnest. A just transition is essential for tackling plastic pollution in ways that respect the human rights of those who work, and also live, on the frontlines of plastic pollution.

2. Are there sufficient mechanisms available to ensure accountability for the adverse impacts of plastics and plastic pollution on human rights? What are the main challenges that you face in terms of accessibility and effectiveness of accountability mechanisms?

- a. *No. EPR and other circular economy policies have been introduced in many places as a policy response to plastic pollution. Unfortunately, most circular economy measures like EPR are still excluding waste pickers in most places-displacing existing workers and violating the human right to work and to participation. In nearly all of these cases, waste pickers are excluded from genuine planning and implementation processes. Where they are invited into the planning process, there is rarely adequate orientation to provide feedback on proposed laws and new systems. And often still these policies do not ensure remediation of existing pollution, nor full and adequate waste collection services for all residents, especially those in informal settlements.*

3. How should the rights to access information, to participate in environmental decision-making and to access to remedy be applied in the context of the plastics life-cycle?

- a. *Simplified and understandable language and graphics help marginalized stakeholders participate.*

4. What does a just transition mean to you in relation to efforts to combat plastic pollution?

From [IAWP's position on Just Transition](#) in the context of the plastics treaty:

- a. *Recognition of waste pickers within informal and cooperative settings in national, provincial, and municipal legislations and norms, policies and laws – Recognition must confer legal entitlements for livelihood and social protection. Legal frameworks should aim for wealth and opportunity*

distribution to impacted workers, workers in the informal economy, and specifically marginalised populations.

- b. Universal registration of waste pickers and other workers in plastics value chains – This should be mandated by national laws and policies. Several steps are identified to facilitate registration and enumeration:*
 - i. include waste pickers as an occupational category within country-level statistics and labour force surveys,*
 - ii. establish local and national databases with stringent data protection protocols that include worker demographics and roles,*
 - iii. involve trained counsellors and or waste pickers themselves to facilitate registration and overcome reluctance and fear,*
 - iv. include detailed plans for research and mapping to identify all actors in materials management systems*
 - v. ensure registration does not criminalise unregistered waste pickers or carry burdensome registration requisites or financial or tax implications.*
 - vi. ensure transparency, oversight and adaptation – Governments and producers should implement mandatory processes to report plastics waste targets and engagement with waste pickers, provision of social protections, and improvements in waste picker income and working conditions. Periodic public independent audits should be mandated, including a financial and socio-economic review of any management body within a given system.*
- c. Direct involvement and advancement in policy-making and implementation processes – IAWP recommends the establishment of public governance committees or fora that effectively include workers in the informal economy and other marginalised waste actors.*
- d. Social and labour protections and safeguards – These should apply to all workers in the materials management system and should be rights-based and universal in scope, governed and delivered by the state, and financed through production-oriented contributions such as EPR, product taxes and other means.*
- e. Fair remuneration, living wages and sustainable livelihoods – This applies to waste picker organisations, as well as to waste pickers who have not been integrated into formal employment arrangements.*
- f. Formalisation and strengthened organising – Governments should support and provide incentives to help waste pickers build strong democratic*

organisations, which can help integrate workers into formal employment and develop skills important for a just transition.

- g. Capacity building and reskilling/upskilling and appropriate technology – Governments should track and report on labour market trends to ensure that any reskilling will be successful over the long term, and should report on the outcome of retraining efforts.*
- h. Improved materials management. This includes:*
 - i. Minimisation of packaging and phasing out of non-recyclable materials.*
 - ii. Design and funding of services for reuse and repair that engage waste pickers.*
 - iii. Mechanical recycling targets and minimum recycled content mandates.*
 - iv. The phase-out of potentially hazardous materials and mandated testing of new technologies/materials to ensure safety.*
 - v. Domestic processing of materials to prevent the flooding of markets with imported plastic scrap, which lowers prices, overburdens local recycling systems and undermines waste picker incomes.*
 - vi. Prioritisation of the regulated management of non-recyclable or hard-to-recycle materials over recyclable materials with pre-existing robust, economically viable markets.*
 - vii. The prevention, prohibition and elimination of climate-intensive, destructive technologies such as incineration.*
 - viii. Clear, truthful labelling of materials to ensure safe handling and processing by waste pickers and recyclers.*
 - ix. Ensuring waste collection services for all materials, including those that end up in the environment and those generated in informal settlements. Waste picker organisations can be contracted to provide these services as part of a just transition out of dumpsites and street-level waste picking.*
 - x. New opportunities for waste pickers and other marginalised waste sector stakeholders through shifts in materials management.*

Please reach out to us at taylor@wastepickersinternational.org if you have any questions or would like to hear about the interconnections among poverty, inequality, waste picking, and plastic pollution.

May 15, 2026