INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCE OF WASTE PICKERS

IAWP's Position on Waste Pickers in Reuse

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Introduction

Plastic pollution has emerged as one of the defining environmental challenges of the 21st century. The proliferation of single-use plastics, combined with inadequate waste management systems, has resulted in severe ecological degradation, marine pollution, and mounting public health concerns. In response, governments, multilateral institutions, and civil society actors have intensified efforts to regulate plastic production and waste through a range of policy instruments, including Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks, national bans on specific plastic products, and global negotiations towards a legally binding treaty on plastic pollution.

Within this broader shift, reuse has gained prominence as a key strategy for reducing reliance on single-use materials, appearing in policy in places like Chile, Germany and the European Union (Cass Talbott, 2026). Unlike recycling, which is constrained by technological limitations, material degradation, and toxic exposure risks, reuse offers the potential to significantly reduce material throughput while minimising environmental harm. However, the transition towards reuse is not merely a technical or environmental shift; it represents a profound restructuring of material economies, with far-reaching implications for livelihoods, particularly those of waste pickers.

Underlying this crisis is a recycling system that consistently fails to deliver on its promise: an estimated 95 percent of packaging plastics, valued at over USD 80 billion annually, are not retained in productive use cycles, and around 72 percent of all plastic packaging is never recovered — 50 percent landfilled and 22 percent leaking into the environment through illegal dumping or burning. Of the share that is collected, only 6–9 percent is actually recycled, and even this is frequently downcycled into lower-value products that cannot be recycled again, leaving a mere 2 percent processed in a genuinely closed loop. Most plastics can withstand only 7 to 10 recycling cycles before losing viability, and the recycling process itself is beset by material losses exceeding 30 percent, while exposing workers — including waste pickers themselves, who often live and work in the communities most affected — to serious health risks from fumes and emissions (Narayan, 2026).

Waste pickers currently play a central role in global material recovery systems, handling more than half of all post-consumer plastic that is collected for recycling around the world. Yet, as attention shifts towards reuse systems, there is growing concern that these workers, who have historically been integral to reuse, repair, and redistribution economies, are being systematically excluded from emerging models. In many parts of the world, waste pickers began their role reusing discarded items found in dumpsites for direct use or as food rescuing for animal feed. Waste pickers' role in reuse is ever changing but remains a key portion of the tasks they perform. Therefore, waste pickers' role has never been confined to recycling alone: waste pickers have been instrumental in operating reuse systems that have functioned at scale over time, such as glass bottle return schemes within the beverage industry, underscoring waste pickers' historic and continuing importance to circular material flows — even where, unlike well-documented contribution to recycling, their role in reuse remains largely unrecorded.

In the context of the UN Plastics Treaty negotiations, as well as within broader policy debates, the International Alliance of Waste Pickers (IAWP) has observed the growing attention to reuse, including sometimes a demand for the inclusion of waste pickers within these systems. But the systems described rarely reflected something that waste pickers could see themselves in, especially automated and subscription-based systems that run parallel rather than within existing material recovery value chains.

While reuse-based livelihoods have been shown to generate more jobs than incineration, disposal, or even recycling, the models emerging in practice too often bypass waste pickers altogether. Closed-loop shops, restaurants, and hotels frequently mechanise the washing, stacking, and collection work involved, or offer only informal, low-wage positions without statutory benefits, while rigid full-time schedules further exclude many waste pickers, especially women. Refillable packaging systems raise similar concerns: many are tied to consumer-facing apps that discourage handing materials over to waste pickers, who often lack the technological and literacy skills such platforms assume, while small-scale, geographically scattered collection points and premium pricing keep these initiatives out of reach for low-income consumers, largely confining reuse to the realm of boutique services.

It became apparent that IAWP needed a clear position on reuse, whether and how to advocate for it in policy, and what types of systems to promote. IAWP developed a series of initial case studies, included as annexes, as well as this position paper. The case studies are the first of an ongoing series. This position paper is the first version of a living document that will be updated over time as waste pickers' experience with reuse is better documented and further developed.

Evidence of Waste Pickers in Reuse

The case studies that informed this position paper cover a range of materials: from durable goods (Luppi, 2026; Saltalippi & Luppi, 2025; Valencia & Saltalippi, 2026), deposit return materials (Cass Talbott, 2026), textiles (Luppi & Igadwa, 2026; Luppi, 2026; Saltalippi & Luppi, 2026) to stuffed animals and cardboard (Valencia & Saltalippi 2026) and religious idols (Narayan, 2026). The case studies highlight that waste pickers are still far more involved in reuse than is officially recorded, often miscategorising reuse as recycling (Valencia & Saltalippi, 2026), but that they risk displacement from reuse livelihoods if they are not proactive in defending and identifying them, and in framing how such systems should operate — to both maximise material recovery and inclusive livelihoods.

The gap in documentation and recognition of the role of waste pickers in reuse is not for lack of evidence that waste pickers belong in the picture; it reflects where attention has and has not been directed. Research on the informal waste management sector has concentrated overwhelmingly on recycling, leaving waste pickers' involvement in reuse comparatively unexamined. Deposit return systems illustrate the same blind spot: despite waste pickers' growing participation in these schemes, including through informal labour absorbed into ostensibly formal collection points, there is virtually no research documenting the role of the informal sector within them (Cass Talbott 2026). The lack of documentation may correspond to reuse's comparable lack of connection to larger markets (as inputs for industry) when compared with recycling. Most reuse activity is marketed directly to consumers.

The scale of what goes uncounted becomes clear once it is actually measured. In Italy, official European reporting credited third-party micro-enterprises with reusing roughly 232,000 tonnes of goods in 2021, but this figure excluded entirely the tonnes recovered and resold by waste pickers operating in the country's formal and informal flea markets. When an IAWP-affiliated research team subsequently measured this activity directly, they found that Italy's 60,000 to 70,000 waste pickers sell between roughly 197,000 and 230,000 tonnes of goods annually (Saltalippi & Luppi, 2025) — a volume comparable to the entire reuse sector previously reported, hiding in plain sight because it had never been measured. In India, Narayan (2026) documents that SWaCH's thrift store handles over 30 metric tonnes monthly with consistent profitability — and the skills, knowledge, and networks of itinerant buyers and waste pickers translate directly into this space with relatively modest additional support. Each metric tonne of reusable material generates approximately one livelihood and delivers environmental benefits roughly 4 times greater than the equivalent material recycled. In Ecuador, Valencia and Saltalippi (2026) found that while recycling overshadows reuse in terms of tonnage collected, reuse generates 1.5 to 10 times the revenue per unit and yields 5.3 percent greater income per tonne. For individual waste pickers in the second-hand clothing market, reuse can generate up to a third of their income. The findings illustrate a broader pattern: while reuse is central to waste picker livelihoods, their contribution to reuse is often not merely under-recorded but can be missing altogether from the baseline figures policymakers rely on. This undermines recognition of waste pickers' existing and future role and claim to a seat at the table as new reuse systems are developed.

Definition of Reuse

A foundational challenge in advancing reuse systems lies in the absence of a universally agreed definition. Across the taxonomy used by environmentalists, the case studies presented here, and policy documents, reuse is conceptualised in multiple, sometimes conflicting ways.

ISO 20887 defines reuse as the "use of products or components more than once for the same purpose without reprocessing". The Basel Convention defines reuse as "the using again of a product, object or substance that is not waste for the same purpose for which it was originally conceived, potentially after repair or refurbishment".

Environmental stakeholders like Ellen MacArthur Foundation and WWF also define reuse as repeat use of a product or packaging for the same purpose. The Break Free From Plastics Movement has been engaging with constituents to develop a reuse taxonomy which, as of the date of this publication, similarly defines reuse as use for the same purpose, though it does establish definitions of similar concepts such as reprocessing and alternative use.

These formal definitions converge on 3 essential elements of Reuse:

- Repeat use
- Does not include reprocessing
- Materials used for the same or similar purpose.

IAWP, in turn, understands and interprets reuse as a lifespan extension strategy that reduces material demand, and generates livelihoods, positioning it as a circular economy pillar above recycling. **IAWP adopts a broader understanding, recognising reuse as encompassing a range of practices, including repair, resale, refill systems, upcycling (reprocessing), and community-based redistribution.** This perspective reflects lived realities in informal economies, where the distinction between reuse, repair, and redistribution is often fluid. Furthermore, the boundary between what constitutes reuse for the same purpose versus reprocessing can be blurry. For example, the upcycling/reprocessing of clothing into a more valuable or fashionable item of clothing constitutes reprocessing for the same use. It is also a viable livelihood option that aligns more closely with reuse markets than with recycling markets. Similarly, the upcycling of packaging into a carry bag does not fundamentally change its function as an item that facilitates the transport and protection of goods.

Upcycling is the transformation of discarded materials, components, or products into new items of equal or greater value, quality, or utility than the original, through creative reprocessing, redesign, or reassembly, without reducing the material to a raw or base form as recycling does. This distinguishes it from what IAWP calls primary reuse, which involves no reprocessing at all, and from recycling and downcycling, which break materials down and typically yield lower-value outputs across successive cycles. Within IAWP's synthesised framework, upcycling sits inside extended reuse: a livelihood-generating form of reprocessing that keeps materials, and the value embedded in them, circulating at or above their original value.

The case studies from Italy, Kenya, and Ecuador demonstrate that these systems are central to reuse economies and provide critical livelihoods for waste pickers.

This divergence in definition highlights a key contradiction: formal definitions and the environmental perspectives prioritise material purity and system boundaries, while informal practices prioritise utility and survival. IAWP's framework better reflects the full spectrum of reuse activities and avoids excluding the contributions of workers in the informal economy.

A synthesised understanding of reuse must therefore encompass:

- Primary reuse: repeated use for the same purpose
- Extended reuse: repair, refurbishment, and repurposing, all extending product life
- Secondary reuse: redistribution through second-hand and informal markets

Opportunities for Waste Pickers

Waste pickers have a lot to gain or lose in the transition towards stronger reuse systems. Informal reuse systems provide accessible and flexible livelihood opportunities for vulnerable populations, and poorly designed formalisation processes may dismantle these systems without providing viable alternatives. The challenge lies in recognising informality as a functional economic system rather than a problem to be eliminated. As observed in Valencia and Saltalippi (2026), reuse can yield greater per unit revenue than recycling, while Luppi and Igadwa (2026) note that upcycling can generate higher-value products and diversify income streams, including for home-based work. Because reuse holds better potential for local rather than international markets, it also supports community organising, job development, and transparency.

Reuse can support a wider range of occupations than recycling, including collection, transportation, street and market vending, washing, repair, upcycling/craft work (delivered through vending, workshops and communications services). This broader range of services may accommodate home-based work more readily than recycling alone. This allows for more flexible working hours and better compatibility with other responsibilities like care work, which is especially important to women in many geographies around the world. Furthermore, in reuse, waste pickers can both create and capture the value from their labour directly, without the high upfront capital expenditure, dependence on third-party reprocessing facilities, or permitting requirements that recycling typically demands. Reuse also better enables alignment with environmental justice principles, which is important for those like waste pickers who are more likely to live and work in polluted spaces.

Challenges for Waste Pickers

While reuse holds considerable opportunity and potential, this is often overshadowed by significant challenges with current systems and practices. The case studies uncovered a range of challenges with reuse, both general and specific to waste pickers, , including:

Lack of legal recognition: Despite growing interest in reuse, legal frameworks remain underdeveloped. Reuse activities are often not explicitly covered under existing regulations, resulting in a lack of documentation and recognition, particularly for actors in the informal economy. Case studies from Ecuador and Italy (Valencia & Saltalippi, 2026; Saltalippi & Luppi, 2025) highlight how reuse economies operate largely outside formal policy frameworks, even when they contribute significantly to waste reduction and livelihoods. This invisibility limits access to funding, infrastructure, and institutional support, leaving reuse informal despite its higher potential benefits. Ignoring hidden reuse economies risks undermining efficient, existing circular practices.

Measurement challenges: Accurately measuring the environmental and economic impacts of reuse systems presents significant challenges. Life Cycle Assessments (LCAs), commonly used to evaluate sustainability, yield varying results and struggle to capture the complexity of reuse systems, particularly those involving decentralised operations and the informal economy. This is largely because LCAs depend on verified commercial or open-source datasets to ensure reproducibility, and little or no data exists regarding waste pickers' operations. This lack of robust data undermines policy support and investment, as decision-makers often rely on quantifiable metrics to allocate resources (Luppi, 2026), while the lack of legal frameworks further compounds these measurement challenges.

Funding constraints and consolidation: Although reuse is widely promoted as part of the circular economy, funding mechanisms remain inadequate. Evidence from multiple case studies illustrates this gap. In India, the SWaCH refill pilot failed due to insufficient margins and low consumer uptake (Narayan, 2026). Deposit Return Systems (DRS), while effective for recycling, rarely allocate meaningful resources towards reuse. Producers have also been reneging on their reuse commitments. This reveals a fundamental contradiction: reuse is prioritised in rhetoric but neglected in practice (Cass Talbott, 2026). Furthermore, circular economy initiatives increasingly favour large-scale actors,

leading to consolidation and reduced opportunities for small-scale entrepreneurs or waste picker associations — a trend evident in European markets and platform-based reuse models.

Market competition: Reuse systems struggle against the significant competition from single-use and recyclable materials. Disposables benefit from established supply chains, economies of scale, and consumer convenience. Initiatives such as the reusable dishware and refill services highlighted in the India case study (Narayan, 2026) demonstrate the difficulty of competing in such an environment. Even when environmentally superior, reuse systems may fail without supportive policy and financial structures.

Fragmentation risks: Isolated reuse pilots and parallel systems can disrupt existing recycling and reuse systems by diverting materials and resources, though in some cases they can also create entry points for excluded waste pickers. Integrated system design is needed to avoid fragmentation of the material stream, but this should be balanced against the need for sustained entry points for economic opportunity within these systems.

Technological barriers: Features such as account-linked returns and automated collection systems can create barriers for waste pickers, who may lack access to technology or formal identification. They are also inconvenient and logistically cumbersome for waste pickers to access.

Structural exclusion: Most reuse systems are designed without considering waste pickers. Policies and business models prioritise producers and consumers, leaving workers in the informal economy marginalised. By linking revenue within reuse models to consumer accounts, the informal sector is effectively bypassed.

Mechanisation and labour displacement: Automation and mechanisation in reuse systems can improve efficiency and reduce drudgery. However, they risk displacing workers in the informal economy whose livelihoods depend on manual collection, sorting, and reuse. Without safeguards, this can lead to large-scale loss of livelihoods. At the same time, while appropriate deployment of technology can improve working conditions and productivity if designed inclusively, automation within the recycling industry may displace workers into the reuse sector, effectively transferring the pressure from one informal livelihood stream to another. Furthermore, the regulation of reuse systems may itself accelerate further automation, mirroring the trajectory already observed in the recycling industry. This dynamic is evidenced by the introduction of DRS pilots for textile reuse in Europe, which warrant further examination (Cass Talbott, 2026).

Challenges of DRS as a potential model. DRS presents both opportunities and challenges. While it can improve material recovery and provide income opportunities, it also introduces competition from consumers and limits opportunities for collective organisation due to its per-unit pricing model. This may marginalise weaker actors, particularly waste pickers, while consolidating benefits among larger players, as evidenced in North America, India, and Ecuador (Cass Talbott, 2026; Narayan, 2026; Valencia & Saltalippi, 2026). However, well-designed systems can balance incentives and inclusion.

Environmental vs social and economic trade-offs: Policies focused solely on environmental outcomes may neglect social and economic impacts, leading to unintended consequences such as livelihood loss. Aligning environmental and economic goals is essential.

Urban space constraints: Access to urban space is critical for reuse activities. Actors in the informal economy rely on flexible, low-cost spaces, which formal systems often restrict. This can lead to consolidation and exclusion unless spatial planning incorporates these actors.

Misperception of stolen goods: The informal resale of durable goods such as textiles and electronics for reuse is frequently misperceived as illicit, especially when vendors appear to be from marginalised or low-income backgrounds and are selling in informal or unsanctioned spaces. This can exacerbate social stigma towards waste pickers and other reuse vendors.

The Need for a Just Transition

The increasing emphasis on reuse necessitates a parallel commitment to a just transition, particularly for workers in the informal economy. A just transition, as reflected across the case studies and the IAWP position, entails not only environmental sustainability but also social equity. It requires that the shift towards reuse systems protects existing livelihoods, prevents displacement, and creates pathways for economic advancement and new opportunities. A just transition is particularly urgent now, in the face of rising unemployment among waste pickers, reduced access to materials, increasing exclusion due to automation and digitalisation (Cass Talbott, 2026), and structural marginalisation within formal reuse systems.

Failure to ensure a just transition poses significant risks: “The prospect of improvement will not materialise if vulnerable individuals limit themselves to defending their status quo or demanding generic recognition. In fact, if they just defend the current situation, they enter in direct conflict with the philosophy and objectives of the transition, condemning their advocacy efforts to immediate failure or, at best, gaining a softer and more gradual expulsion from the system.” (Luppi, 2026).

These risks include:

- Economic displacement: As reuse systems reduce the availability of recyclable materials, waste pickers may lose their primary source of income.
- Increased inequality: Exclusion from new systems may exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities.
- Reduced material recovery: Waste pickers’ efficiency in collecting materials may not be replicated by formal systems, leading to lower recovery rates.
- Social conflict: As noted in Luppi (2026), resistance to change without proactive engagement may result in marginalisation rather than inclusion.

At the same time, there is evidence that reducing inequality can have positive macroeconomic effects, suggesting that inclusive reuse systems may benefit not only workers but society as a whole (Cass Talbott, 2026). Conversely, poorly designed reuse systems may reduce waste while increasing poverty.

Recommendations for Inclusive Reuse Systems: Policy, Practice, and Just Transition

Part One: General Principles for Inclusive Reuse

The recommendations set out in this chapter emerge from a body of field experience, case study evidence, and policy analysis covering reuse initiatives in India, Ecuador, Italy, Kenya, and North America. Across all of these contexts, a set of foundational principles recurs consistently. These principles are not prescriptive blueprints; they are enabling conditions without which reuse systems risk becoming environmentally incomplete and socially unjust. They apply regardless of the type of reuse being considered, the geography in which it is implemented, or the stakeholders leading it.

1.1 *Inclusion Must Be Designed In, Not Added On*

Reuse represents a genuine opportunity to align environmental sustainability with social justice — but only if it is designed from the outset to include the workers who already sustain informal material recovery systems. Waste pickers are not peripheral actors in circular economies; they are foundational ones. They collect, sort, transport, repair, and resell materials at scale, often without recognition, infrastructure support, or social protection.

Experience from pilots in Pune and Bengaluru, India, demonstrates that small-scale, app-based, or boutique reuse models often exclude waste pickers through structural barriers: requirements for digital literacy, formal driving licences, rigid working hours, and upfront capital. The jobs created by such models are often structurally inaccessible to the workers that a just transition should prioritise. By contrast, open-loop reuse systems — such as the recovery of standardised glass bottles — integrate informal economy workers naturally and at scale, without disrupting existing livelihoods.

Not only companies, but also policymakers need to design inclusion into their laws and waste regulations from the start. For example, under Ecuador's Deposit Return System (IRBP)[1], waste picker associations were not eligible to receive the redeemable tax, as only registered recycling facilities qualified as beneficiaries. When the government announced the intent to remove the tax, the market price paid for polyethylene declined, reducing waste pickers' revenues. This price adjustment contributed to waste pickers' support for maintaining the tax, despite not being direct beneficiaries. This distracted from more efficient and relevant policy to be implemented for waste pickers' inclusion, which was an initial goal for the IRBP (Valencia & Saltalippi, 2026).

The principle is therefore clear: inclusion cannot be retrofitted. It must shape system architecture, governance, and incentive design from the earliest planning stages.

[1] Ecuador's IRBP is a deposit return system focused on recycling but the mechanism for collection and redeemability could work similarly for reuse systems.

1.2 *Reuse Must Sit Above Recycling in the Policy Hierarchy*

A fundamental and recurring failure in current circular economy policy is the treatment of reuse and recycling as equivalent or interchangeable strategies. They are not. Reuse prevents waste at source; recycling manages it after it has been generated. Each metric tonne of material diverted through reuse delivers environmental benefits approximately four times greater than the same tonne recycled (Narayan, 2026).

Policy frameworks — national and subnational — must explicitly position reuse above recycling, establish quantitative reuse targets, and embed these targets within EPR frameworks. Current EPR instruments in most jurisdictions are recycling-centric; allowing EPR compliance pathways through reuse and refill systems would direct investment and incentive structures toward higher-order solutions.

1.3 *Standardisation Is a Prerequisite for Scale*

Reuse systems cannot scale without standardised packaging and durability requirements for durable goods. The historical success of open-loop glass bottle reuse — once a widespread and efficient system across many countries — depended entirely on standardised bottle designs that enabled easy sorting, washing, and re-commercialisation. Where standards have been archived or abandoned, recovery rates have collapsed and the economics of informal collection have deteriorated sharply.

Binding national standards for packaging design, sizing, material composition, and labelling are therefore not technical minutiae; they are a structural requirement for inclusive, scalable reuse. Furthermore, durable goods must bear standards for durability. Standards must be designed with occupational safety in mind, ensuring that materials handled by collectors, sorters, and washers do not pose health risks at any stage of the value chain.

1.4 *Consumer Behaviour Change Requires Policy, Not Goodwill*

Across all case studies, voluntary shifts in consumer behaviour proved insufficient to sustain reuse systems. Refill pilots in both Pune and Bengaluru collapsed because consumers prioritised brand choice, delivery convenience, and familiarity over environmental benefits. In contrast, the long-running Nirmalya festival waste initiative in Pune succeeded because it operated within a court-mandated policy framework, backed by municipal infrastructure and sustained civil society coordination.

This evidence is unambiguous: consumer behaviour change at the scale required to make reuse viable cannot be achieved through outreach and persuasion alone. It requires clear regulatory mandates, economic incentives and penalties, improved architecture and sustained public investment in the infrastructure that makes reuse convenient rather than burdensome.

1.5 *Open-Loop Systems Are More Accessible Than Closed-Loop*

Closed-loop and semi-closed reuse models — in which packaging and other goods are returned to a specific brand or vendor — typically bypass waste pickers entirely or require consumer behaviours that do not materialise. Open-loop systems, where used packaging and other goods enter the general waste stream and are recovered through existing informal channels, integrate informal economy workers without structural exclusion and without imposing significant burdens on consumers.

Where open-loop systems have been allowed to function — as with the glass bottle trade — they have generated sustained livelihoods and meaningful environmental outcomes.

Closed-loop systems tend to exclude waste pickers, but can also establish carve-outs or entry points for organised waste pickers to benefit, especially in saturated or highly privatised markets.

Policy design should recognise this distinction and provide support for open-loop models, particularly in labour-intensive economies where informal waste recovery is already operating at scale.

1.6 *Oversight, Data, and Accountability Must Be Built Into Systems*

Reuse systems that are not monitored cannot be improved, and benefits that are not measured cannot be claimed. A recurring weakness identified across case studies is the absence of systematic data collection on livelihood impacts, material diversion rates, and the distribution of economic value within reuse supply chains.

Independent oversight bodies and accessible and interactive waste picker registries should be established to track livelihood impacts, job creation, and informal sector integration. Periodic audits should assess the full income and expenditure of reuse systems, identify equity gaps, and guide continuous improvement. **Waste pickers must be included as named stakeholders in these bodies, not as passive subjects of monitoring but as active participants in governance.**

1.7 *Financing Must Reach Informal Economy Actors*

Reuse is not self-financing in its early stages, and existing financing models — whether public subsidy, EPR levies, or impact investment — rarely reach informal sector organisations. Waste picker cooperatives and associations typically lack the collateral, documentation, and institutional form required to access conventional financial instruments.

Financing mechanisms for reuse must be redesigned with inclusivity as a core criterion. This means blended funding models that can flow to cooperatives and informal associations; low-interest loans and grants for infrastructure investment; and EPR levy structures that include social eligibility criteria ensuring that waste pickers and their organisations can directly access and benefit from the system.

1.8 *Mechanisation Must Complement, Not Displace, Labour*

As reuse systems scale and invest in washing, sorting, and logistics infrastructure, there is a consistent risk that mechanisation will be used to minimise labour costs in ways that displace the workers the system was designed to include. This risk must be explicitly anticipated and governed.

Every investment in mechanised or automated systems within reuse supply chains should be accompanied by a labour impact assessment. Where mechanisation is introduced, transition pathways must be in place for affected workers. The default assumption should be that manual systems are preferred where they generate decent livelihoods, and that mechanisation is appropriate only where it addresses genuine incapacity or safety concerns rather than a preference for reduced labour costs.

1.9 *Occupational and Environmental Health and Safety*

Emerging evidence on the environmental and health impacts of polyester-blend fabrics and synthetic dyes, as well as plastics with flame retardants and other hazardous substances, must be backed by robust lifecycle assessments. An overall review of synthetic materials, covering their toxicity, exposure pathways, and occupational risk, alongside

their reuse potential and recycling viability, is critical to inform both policy design and protective measures for workers.

Where poly-blend materials and chemical additives are found to carry significant health risks, extended producer responsibility instruments must be used to shift the cost of safe management to producers, away from the waste pickers who currently bear this exposure without protective equipment, training, or compensation. Appropriate pricing mechanisms should ensure that the burden of managing difficult-to-recycle synthetics falls on the polluter — industry first, then consumers — not on the informal economy workers.

1.10 *Just Transition Is Mandatory and Not Optional*

The shift from linear, disposable-packaging-based systems to circular, reuse-based ones will generate disruption in existing livelihood structures, including those of waste pickers who currently depend on the collection and sale of recyclable materials. This disruption must be anticipated, assessed, and managed.

Livelihood vulnerability assessments should be mandated before the rollout of any significant reuse system. Clear transition pathways — including funded capacity building, upskilling, and formal placement in reuse and repair supply chains — must be developed and resourced. Minimum hiring quotas for waste pickers in new reuse operations should be established, with attention to real-world constraints including limited digital literacy and restricted mobility. **A just transition is not an aspiration to be acknowledged in policy preambles; it is a set of binding commitments that must be enforced, monitored, and resourced.**

Part Two: Recommendations by Type of Reuse

The following sections set out specific recommendations for each major type of reuse system. While the general principles in Part One apply across all of these, each reuse type presents distinct operational characteristics, inclusion challenges, and policy levers. Recommendations are grounded in documented field experience and structured to be actionable for the range of stakeholders — governments, producers, civil society, and waste picker organisations — who must work together to make these systems viable.

2.1 *Refillables*

Refillable packaging systems — in which containers are returned, cleaned, and refilled — offer significant environmental benefits but have proved difficult to implement at scale in a way that is inclusive of informal economy workers. Pilots in India have demonstrated both the potential and the structural limitations of this model when it is not designed with sufficient investment, standardisation, or policy mandate.

System Design and Feasibility

- Reuse strategies must be designed comprehensively from the outset. Detailed operational and investment plans (including reverse logistics, washing infrastructure, storage, and distribution) must be developed before any pilot is launched. Short-sighted, small-scale pilots that do not integrate into broader materials management systems and can compete with waste pickers should be avoided. Ideally these systems should be implemented city-wide.
- Delivery models must be geographically viable. Single-warehouse delivery models are operationally unworkable in dense urban environments and can lead to monopolistic control over the system. Any refill system must demonstrate that delivery density and logistics costs are consistent with financial sustainability before roll-out.
- Open-loop refill systems — where packaging enters the general waste stream and is recovered by waste pickers — should be prioritised over closed-loop or app-based models that create structural barriers to informal waste management sector participation.

- The economic and environmental case for refillables must be tested against existing recycling infrastructure to ensure that diversion of high-value recyclables (such as rigid HDPE) does not undermine existing waste picker livelihoods without replacing them with equivalent or better alternatives.
- Account-based return systems should be avoided so that anyone can collect and receive payment for the returned material.

Standards and Producer Accountability

- Governments must implement binding national standards for refillable packaging design, sizing, material composition, and labelling. Without standardisation, sorting, washing, and re-commercialisation are uneconomic and inconsistent.
- Producers must be required to adopt standardised reusable formats, enabling sorting efficiency and allowing multiple stakeholders, including informal economy collectors, to participate in the value chain.
- Material composition must be safe for workers at all stages of handling. Hazardous additives, sharp edges, and materials that pose health risks during collection, sorting, or washing must be eliminated from refillable packaging design.
- Mechanised washing and sorting systems must be assessed against manual alternatives, with preference given to labour-intensive approaches where these generate decent livelihoods without compromising quality.

Policy Enabling Conditions

- Consumer behaviour change at the scale required for refillables to succeed cannot be achieved voluntarily. Regulatory mandates, including minimum reuse targets linked to EPR compliance, are necessary to create the demand-side conditions for viable refill systems.
- Subsidies must be designed to make refill systems affordable for low-income consumers, including waste pickers themselves. Systems priced as boutique services exclude the communities most affected by the transition.
- Entry barriers for waste pickers, such as digital literacy requirements, driving licences, and upfront capital costs, must be identified and removed in the design of refill employment pathways. Funded capacity building and placement programmes must be in place before systems launch.
- Decentralised collection and washing facilities must be accommodated within city development plans and local area zoning, co-located with existing recyclable storage infrastructure such as Material Recovery Facilities, depots and others wherever possible.
- Rationalise taxation on refillable and recyclable materials by eliminating or significantly reducing levies that add unnecessary cost burdens to recovery systems, improving price realisation for waste pickers across the value chain.

2.2 *Deposit Return Systems (DRS)*

DRS can generate significant material recovery and create pathways to more formal employment for waste pickers — but only if they are designed with equitable access at their core. Where DRS are poorly designed, they can disrupt existing informal material recovery chains, concentrate market power among larger operators, and exclude the workers who already perform much of the collection labour at no cost to the system.

Scope and Material Coverage

- DRS should target low – and no-value materials first, to avoid disrupting existing informal value chains for materials that are already being collected and commercialised by waste pickers, and to prioritise the recovery of materials that are most likely to end up in the environment.

- Deposits or producer-subsidised premiums should be extended to a broader range of materials — particularly those that are currently uneconomic to collect — to ensure that they are recovered from source and from the environment.
- Potentially hazardous and heavy materials (such as 500ml glass bottles) should carry a higher deposit or premium to reflect the additional labour and risk involved in their collection.
- The deposit or premium amount should be sufficient to incentivise high rates of collection on materials. The deposit level should be automatically reviewed and increased if return rates fall below 80 percent.

Access and Equity

- Deposits must not be linked to specific individuals or digital accounts. Any person should be able to return covered materials and receive the deposit or premium without registration, identification, or digital access requirements.
- Waste pickers must be explicitly named and defined in DRS policy instruments. Their role as collectors must be legally recognised and protected.
- Public and private bins covered by DRS must not be locked. Informal collection at kerbside and in public spaces must be legalised and protected.
- DRS design should ensure that deposit values and system convenience are sufficient to maximise collection while not generating consumer competition for materials that undermines waste picker livelihoods.

System Governance and Depot Access

- Licences and access to handling fees within DRS should prioritise depots operated by social enterprises, cooperatives, and non-profit organisations with a mission to provide formal livelihoods for low-income workers, specifically waste pickers. This should not, however, exclude other operators, so as to maintain system accessibility and diversity.
- The system should include a per-unit handling fee for system operators. A minimum handling fee of 70 percent of the deposit value is recommended.
- Governments and producers should jointly ensure free and affordable access to land and permitting for a decentralised network of depots, reducing the capital barriers to entry for waste picker-led operations.
- Depot operators should not be required to provide material transportation as a condition of participation. Transportation requirements create significant upfront barriers, including in securing insurance, and should be managed separately at the system level.
- Options for formal registration of waste pickers within DRS should be created, providing access to social benefits and employment protections without requiring exclusion from informal collection activities.

Oversight, Auditing, and Investment

- A state-appointed advisory committee should be established to provide regular updates, analyse equity within the system, and review programme audits. Waste pickers must be included as referenced stakeholders in these bodies.
- Periodic, state-mandated system audits should assess the full income and expenditure of the system, material recovery impacts, and the distribution of opportunities across different types of operators and collectors.
- Producers must always be the responsible party for paying the handling fee.
- Unredeemed deposits should be reinvested into the system, with priority given to equity-focused investments including subsidies for depot establishment and operating costs for waste picker-led organisations.
- Better data collection is required on who is implementing and benefiting from DRS, distinguishing between consumer returns and waste picker returns, and identifying which entities are operating different system components.

- In Ecuador and similar contexts, DRS fiscal instruments, such as the Redeemable Tax on Non-Refillable Plastic Bottles, must include social eligibility criteria ensuring that waste picker associations can directly operate elements of the system and access benefits. Mechanisms to discourage market speculation and concentration of intermediary power must be built in from the design stage.

2.3 *Durable Goods (Textiles and Others)*

All durable goods, which are those goods that do not exhaust their function in a single use, are potentially reusable; and waste pickers handle most types of durable goods. Textiles, toys, books, furniture, household appliances and many other categories constitute durable goods handled by the waste picker economy. In many countries, despite their informality and lack of recognition, waste pickers represent the most impactful segment of the reuse economy. Historically, when structured waste management was not established, waste pickers and other micro-actors carried out the totality of reuse activity; in recent years, as public policy has increasingly begun to include reuse objectives, specific actors within the reuse economy are prioritised while others, like waste pickers, are overlooked. For example, in Europe the primary player that is recognised is part of the social economy, which does not represent the needs of waste pickers.

Waste pickers who pick reusable items in the street or directly from houses often resell second-hand goods directly in the streets (informal markets, street corners and other relevant spaces.), and in some cases they sell from warehouses or shops. In many places, their vending activity is stigmatised and actively prohibited or opposed by municipalities, including through demagogic and racist arguments.

Collection

- Separate collection of durable goods waste from the collection of reusable items that are not classified as waste, should be normatively and operationally designed to take into account the existence of waste pickers, valorizing and increasing the contribution they bring to the system, and setting traceability systems and tools designed to function according to their operational characteristics.

Segregation and Warehousing

- In order to maximise the environmental impact of reuse, scale it beyond local value chains, and increase the efficiency of waste pickers' work, warehousing facilities for material segregation and processing are fundamental, and need investment and improvement. Public funds and public real estate assets, at municipal, district/province/state and national levels, should be assigned to support waste pickers to improve their work efficiency and effectiveness

Street Vending and Thrift Stores

- Waste pickers should be allowed to sell reusable items in public and regular spaces, with licensing and authorisation formulas that take into account the economic size of their activity and the low margins obtained from second-hand goods. In specific cases, like textiles, some waste pickers abandon picking activities and start to buy stock near sorting plants or wholesalers, limiting their work to vending in the streets or in thrift stores; also in this case, and even when these micro-players are no longer technically definable as waste pickers, the activity should be protected, favoured and taken into account by public policy.

Repair

- In many contexts, where economic margins and market prices permit, waste pickers who facilitate reuse also perform repair, contributing to the large field of repair craftwork. All micro craftsworkers, not only waste pickers, tend to be overlooked in public policy; and when municipalities have the economic resources to spend on repair practice, they often direct funding to "repair cafés" or other similar activities that are distant from the economy

of repair. Repair cafés, where present, should focus on building a culture of repair without substituting paid repair and refurbishment work run by waste pickers and other micro-entrepreneurs, rather than competing for funding for than an ever-larger volunteer workforce that provides services at no cost.

Extended Producer Responsibility

- In growing parts of the world, producers are increasingly obligated under EPR schemes to handle durable goods (especially textiles). Under these obligations, producers should guarantee the economic sustainability of reuse activities, including technical, operational, health, safety and fair labour aspects, and granting waste pickers central roles in value chains, including collection, sorting, laundering where necessary, resale and redistribution.

Traceability

- The pathways of reusable items should be traced with full transparency, and the involvement of waste pickers and other micro-players can enable this. Waste pickers can be the environmental sentinel of the system, but only if traceability systems and tools are developed for maximum inclusion, taking into account limited literacy and access to technology, and micro-scale activities that often do not allow time or capacity for traceability duties.

Formalisation and Market Support

- The role of waste pickers in durable goods collection and resale must be defined clearly in legal instruments for materials management.
- Operational models that allow waste pickers and their organisations to participate must be promoted, including through international policy instruments and trade agreements.

Impact Measurement and Investment

- Reuse impact metrics — including landfill waste diversion, income generated for waste pickers, and carbon emission reductions — should be systematically tracked to guide continuous improvement and demonstrate the case for further investment.
- Low-interest loans and subsidies for waste picker organisations investing in thrift store infrastructure must be made accessible through dedicated financing instruments.
- Private sector organisations active in the green economy should be required or strongly incentivised to invest in thrift store infrastructure and support waste picker enterprises as part of corporate sustainability commitments.

2.4 *Cultural and Religious Programmes*

Community celebrations of religious and cultural events create recurring, high-visibility opportunities for reuse practice, public education on material consumption, and waste picker livelihoods in collection, retrieval, and resale of festival materials. The long-running Nirmalya festival waste initiative in Pune — implemented within a court-mandated policy framework — demonstrates that policy mandates, municipal infrastructure, and sustained civil society engagement can achieve significant and lasting change, including the diversion of idol and festival materials to reuse.

Policy Framework

- A suitable policy framework should be established to govern material use and waste generation at large-scale public events, including religious and cultural celebrations. This framework should recognise the tension

between protecting religious sentiments and protecting the environment, and build a harmonious context for them to co-exist.

- State-supported infrastructure and spaces for reuse stores for idols, decorations, and festival materials — along with repair facilities — should be established, offering potential for green livelihoods in education and outreach, retrieval, repurposing, and resale of such materials at affordable prices to economically weaker communities.
- Policy should include explicit messaging on alternative material use and the reuse of existing infrastructure, paraphernalia, and decorations, in a spirit of sharing, conserving, and providing for indigent communities.

Implementation and Enforcement

- Although policy may not explicitly name waste pickers, their proactive engagement should be institutionalised through formal partnerships with waste picker organisations — as demonstrated by the role of KKPKP and SWaCH in the Pune Nirmalya initiative.
- Sustained civil society coordination, grassroots participation, and active municipal support are essential to entrench waste pickers within festival waste management systems, even where the formal policy framework does not specifically reference them.
- Extensive outreach with event organisers, community leaders, and allied vendors is critical for wider and sustained change in material consumption during cultural and religious events.

Just Transition and Livelihoods

- Newer livelihood opportunities generated by inclusive cultural event programmes — including washing, cleaning, collection, and resale — should be earmarked and reserved for waste pickers and their organisations as a just transition measure.
- Financial measures, including low-interest loans and subsidies, should be provided to ensure waste picker organisations can invest in the infrastructure required to participate — including storage for festival materials, transport, and display facilities.
- The risk that voluntary systems — such as organisations that provide reusable cutlery at events for free — undermine revenue models for waste picker enterprises, must be recognised and addressed. Policy should create conditions in which commercially viable, waste picker-run event services can compete, including by regulating the conditions under which free provision of reusable materials is permissible.

2.5 *Green Events*

Green event programmes — mandating the use of reusable or compostable materials at public events and penalising the use of single-use plastics — are among the most direct policy tools available for driving reuse behaviour change. Their effectiveness depends critically on strong enforcement, investment in outreach, and ensuring that the livelihoods generated flow to waste pickers rather than to competing operators.

Establishing the Policy Framework

- To maximise livelihood potential and environmental justice, all events above a defined minimum size (based on the number of guests) should be required to be green events, with a complete ban on single-use plastics and a mandate for reusable or compostable alternatives including cutlery, containers, and serving ware. Single-use items, including non-recyclable decoration items such as flex banners, polystyrene, and synthetic sponges, should be disallowed at regulated events.

Enforcement and Incentives

- Stiff penalties on organisers and hosts who do not comply with green event requirements are essential for driving meaningful change. Enforcement must be consistent and well-resourced; policies without enforcement create only the appearance of progress.
- Stringent implementation of single-use plastic bans at events will be critical to generating the demand that makes waste picker-run cutlery banks and event ware services commercially viable.
- Incentive structures — including procurement preferences, insurance support, and access to municipal storage facilities — should be established to support waste picker organisations competing for green event service contracts.

Outreach and Behavioural Change

- Extensive outreach with hosts, event managers, caterers, and allied service vendors is required to build the broad, sustained changes in practice needed for inclusive green event mandates to succeed. Participatory approaches that bring event stakeholders into the design of compliance pathways will be more effective than top-down enforcement alone.
- Behaviour patterns and preferences — including, in some contexts, reluctance to use shared ware across caste or community boundaries — will need sensitive, sustained engagement to change. Outreach programmes must be tailored to local cultural contexts.
- A robust policy mandate and infrastructure support are necessary to overcome barriers such as water scarcity (which affects the feasibility of reusable ware at events in some areas) and the use of single-use items as a status symbol among lower-income communities.

Protecting Waste Picker Livelihoods

- Livelihood opportunities generated by the green events sector — including cutlery bank management, washing and logistics services, and collection after events — must be reserved for waste pickers and waste picker organisations as a just transition measure.
- Voluntarist systems in which politically motivated organisations or charities provide reusable event ware at no cost must not be permitted to undermine the viability of commercially operated, waste picker-run services. Policy must create a level playing field.

2.6 *Upcycling*

Upcycling — the creative transformation of discarded materials and products into new items of equal or greater value — is among the most direct pathways from waste picker livelihoods into higher-value reuse markets. Waste pickers' activity in this field contributes to a wide world of upcycling micro-players, all within the same ecosystem deserving of recognition and support. Case studies from Italy, Kenya, Ecuador, and India document waste pickers already transforming durable goods, textiles, and festival materials into higher-value products, frequently as home-based or craft-based work. Because upcycling involves reprocessing but keeps materials at or above their original value, it sits closer to reuse markets and livelihoods than to industrial recycling, and should be supported, financed, and regulated accordingly.

Recognition and Market Positioning

- Upcycling must be explicitly recognised within reuse policy and taxonomy as reprocessing that remains part of reuse markets and livelihoods, distinct from industrial recycling, so that waste pickers engaged in upcycling are not excluded from reuse-specific support, financing, and market access.

- Policy and municipal procurement should recognise upcycled products as legitimate reuse-sector goods, including in green event and festival material programmes, rather than treating them as a marginal craft category.

Skills, Training, and Value Chains

- Capacity building and certification programmes for upcycling and craft-based reprocessing — covering design, repair, textile transformation, finishing, and communications — should be funded and made accessible to waste pickers, building on skills many already apply informally in handling, sorting, and refurbishing discarded goods.
- Home-based upcycling work should be explicitly supported through decentralised training, tool provision, and market linkages, recognising that it can accommodate workers, including women, for whom rigid workplace-based models are inaccessible.
- Value chains connecting waste pickers who collect and sort materials with those who upcycle them should be strengthened, so that reprocessing income flows to and through the informal collection economy rather than bypassing it.

Space, Standards, and Safety

- Decentralised workspace for upcycling and craft-based reprocessing — including tool storage, workbenches, and display areas — should be allocated within city infrastructure and co-located with existing reuse markets and thrift store facilities.
- Material safety standards must apply to upcycling in the same way as to other reprocessing: materials handled, cut, dyed, or refinished by waste pickers must not expose them to hazardous substances, and appropriate protective equipment and training must be funded as part of any upcycling programme.
- Quality and traceability guidance for upcycled goods should be developed in ways compatible with small-scale, informal production, so that upcycled products can access formal retail and export markets without imposing standardisation costs that exclude waste picker producers.

Financing and Just Transition

- Low-interest loans, grants, and EPR-linked financing should be made available for the tools, training, and workspace that upcycling enterprises require, recognising the relatively low capital intensity and high livelihood-generation potential of this work.
- Data collection on reuse systems should disaggregate upcycling as a distinct category of activity, capturing income generated, materials diverted, and the number of livelihoods supported, so that its contribution to reuse economies is no longer invisible in official reuse statistics.
- Corporate and government procurement policies should support the purchase of locally-made upcycled goods.

Part Three: Recommendations by Stakeholder

Inclusive reuse systems require coordinated action across a range of stakeholders, each with distinct roles, responsibilities, and leverage points. The following sections set out specific, actionable recommendations for each of the six primary stakeholder groups. These recommendations draw on and consolidate the analysis across all reuse types, and are intended to be used directly in stakeholder engagement, policy advocacy, and programme design.

3.1 *Policy Makers*

Policy makers at national, state, and municipal levels have the greatest leverage to create the enabling conditions for inclusive reuse. Their role is not to manage reuse systems directly, but to set the frameworks within which systems can become viable, scalable, and equitable.

Positioning Reuse in the Policy Hierarchy

- Reuse must be explicitly positioned above recycling in all national and subnational waste management strategies.
- Current policy emphasis on recycling should be rebalanced: reuse is a higher-order strategy with greater environmental returns, and policy investment and incentive structures should reflect this.
- Quantitative reuse targets should be established, and reuse and refill compliance pathways integrated into Extended Producer Responsibility frameworks.
- National and municipal targets for material diversion through reuse should be introduced progressively, expressed in terms of tonnage or percentage of materials diverted, with clear monitoring indicators and timelines.

Recognising and Integrating Informal Reuse Systems

- Informal reuse already exists at scale. Policy must recognise informal waste management sector actors (waste pickers, itinerant buyers, second-hand traders, repair workers) as essential contributors to circular systems, protect their livelihoods, and integrate them into emerging formal frameworks.
- Legal recognition, inclusion in governance systems, access to finance, and support for waste pickers' cooperatives and associations are the primary instruments for integrating informal economy reuse actors.
- Waste pickers and street vendors must be included in the planning, governance, and implementation of reuse investments, including those connected to international supply chains.
- Urban planning must allocate space for informal reuse activities performed by waste pickers, including thrift stores, second-hand markets, and collection, washing, and storage facilities.

Just Transition

- Livelihood vulnerability assessments must be mandated before any significant reuse system is launched, identifying risks to existing waste picker livelihoods and requiring mitigation plans before roll-out.
- Minimum hiring quotas for waste pickers in new reuse operations must be established and enforced, with attention to real-world access constraints including digital literacy, mobility, and available working hours.
- Capacity building, upskilling, and formal placement pathways for workers impacted by economic and policy transition must be funded and in place before systems launch.
- Policy-makers should be vigilant in protecting the operating reuse markets from monopolisation by industry or any single provider.
- Independent oversight bodies must be established to track livelihood impacts, monitor compliance with just transition commitments, and publish regular public reports.

Standards, Incentives, and Enforcement

- Binding national standards for reusable and refillable packaging — covering design, sizing, material composition, and labelling — must be enacted and enforced to enable open-loop reuse at scale.
- DRS systems must be designed to balance deposit values with equitable access for waste pickers: deposits must be sufficient to incentivise collection, while access to the system must not be conditional on digital accounts, formal identity documents, or consumer-specific registration.

- Single-use plastic bans at events above a defined threshold must be enacted and enforced, with naturally degradable and reusable alternatives mandated and supported by municipal infrastructure.
- Taxation on reusable and recyclable materials should be rationalised — eliminating or significantly reducing levies that add unnecessary cost burdens to material recovery — to improve price realisation for waste pickers.
- Safeguards must be developed to ensure mechanisation complements rather than replaces informal labour. Labour impact assessments must accompany investments in reuse infrastructure.
- Co-location of reuse and recycling infrastructure should be encouraged to strengthen material recovery systems and avoid duplication of facilities.
- Comprehensive data collection and monitoring frameworks must be established, including indicators on livelihood impact, material diversion rates, and the distribution of economic value across the reuse supply chain.

3.2 *Waste Pickers*

Waste pickers are are active agents in circular systems with expertise, organisation, and legitimate claims on governance. The following recommendations are directed at waste picker organisations and alliances, to support them in positioning themselves as proactive contributors to inclusive reuse.

Collective Organisation and Alliance Building

- Waste pickers should strengthen collective organisations — cooperatives, associations, and unions — to amplify their voice in policy processes and assert their role as essential service providers in the reuse economy. Active engagement to clearly identify all of the destinations of the waste picked is crucial to highlight that waste pickers support more than just recycling.
- Networks and alliances should be built with other marginalised and vulnerable groups — informal economy workers, smallholder producers, community organisations, micro-enterprises of repairers and artisans — to articulate common policy demands around reuse and just transition.
- Alliance building with environmentalist organisations, legal advocates, and civil society groups creates political conditions in which waste picker interests can be embedded within broader policy frameworks, even where they are not explicitly named.

Proactive Positioning and Technical Engagement

- Waste pickers should develop nuanced, specific, technical proposals positioning themselves as proactive solution providers within reuse systems — not as part of the problem that reuse is designed to solve.
- Proposals should address concrete operational questions: how waste pickers can manage refillable container collection, operate washing facilities, run thrift stores, or provide green event services — with costed models and evidence from existing practice.
- Waste pickers should engage actively in policy processes at national and subnational level, advocating for fair wages, transparent pricing mechanisms, access to benefits, and formal recognition within reuse supply chains.

Negotiating Fair Access to Systems

- Waste pickers should engage in dialogue on technology adoption — including digitisation of collection records, app-based systems, and mechanised sorting — to ensure fair integration rather than displacement or competition.
- Collective bargaining must be used to secure access to materials, physical space for operations, access to finance, and formal roles within emerging reuse systems, including DRS depots, washing facilities, and thrift market infrastructure.

- Where DRS are being designed or renegotiated, waste picker organisations should advocate for deposit levels that are sufficient to incentivise collection (preferably larger than the price per unit when sold by weight, and larger for difficult-to-handle materials like glass), access that is not conditional on digital or identity requirements, and priority licensing for cooperative and social enterprise depots.
- Waste pickers should be vigilant about voluntarist systems — including politically motivated organisations providing reusable event ware or materials for free — that undermine the commercial viability of waste picker enterprises. These concerns should be raised explicitly in policy engagement and media advocacy.

3.3 *Consumers*

Consumers are both the drivers of material demand and the principal source of reusable materials entering the waste stream. While individual behaviour change is ultimately necessary, the evidence is clear that it cannot be achieved through goodwill alone. The following recommendations address both what consumers can do and what policy and system design must enable.

Understanding Consumer Constraints

- System designers and policy makers must recognise that voluntary consumer behaviour change is extremely difficult in the face of convenience, brand choice, and the low incremental cost of single-use options. Reuse systems that depend on consumer goodwill alone will not achieve the scale needed for environmental or social impact.
- Reuse systems must not place an unreasonable burden on consumers.
- Affordability is a dimension of inclusivity. Reuse systems priced as boutique services exclude low-income consumers, including waste pickers themselves. Subsidies and pricing mechanisms must ensure reuse is accessible across income groups.

Source Segregation and Donation

- Consumers should be enabled and encouraged to segregate reusable items — household goods, textiles, containers — from mixed waste at source, directing them to separate waste collections, designated collection points, thrift stores, or reuse centres.
- Urban local bodies should facilitate this through clear public communication, dedicated collection days, and convenient drop-off infrastructure in residential areas.
- Awareness campaigns should emphasise the social value of donating to waste picker-operated thrift stores and reuse enterprises, and the livelihood impact of doing so.

Engagement with Reuse Culture

- Public awareness should build understanding of the environmental and social benefits of reuse — including the livelihoods it sustains — to increase consumer appreciation for refurbished goods, second-hand markets, and reusable packaging.
- Green event culture should be normalised through outreach, celebration of compliance, and visibility for waste picker-run services at public events.
- Mobile applications focused on inclusive recycling — such as those already operating in Ecuador and elsewhere — could add functionality for classifying and directing reusable items, improving data collection and providing incentives for users who participate in reuse.
- Waste pickers can serve as key actors in educating consumers about reuse systems and should be financially supported for these roles.

3.4 *Environmentalists*

Environmental organisations and advocates have a critical role in ensuring that reuse policy is designed for social justice as well as environmental effectiveness. The risk that reuse systems replicate existing inequalities — by favouring technologically sophisticated, centralised, or consumer-oriented models over those that integrate informal workers — must be named and resisted by the environmental movement.

Clarifying and Harmonising Definitions

- A foundational step is the advocacy for a clear, consistent, and operationally useful definition of reuse across policy frameworks. Current ambiguity — particularly around the distinction between reuse, recycling, repair, and repurposing — creates regulatory gaps and weakens implementation.
- Definitions must be flexible enough to accommodate real-world informal reuse practices, where reuse often extends beyond strict same-purpose use. Informal reuse economies must be explicitly recognised in policy language.
- Environmental organisations should proactively advocate for definitions and policy language that recognise informal reuse systems, reuse practices, and reuse business models as legitimate and valuable.

Advancing Justice-Based Frameworks

- Environmental organisations must generate and amplify evidence on the social and livelihood benefits of reuse, not only its environmental benefits. The case for inclusive reuse is stronger when it encompasses both dimensions.
- Advocacy should explicitly address labour rights and the risk of displacement of informal workers in mechanised and centralised reuse systems. The environmental movement must not be complicit in systems that achieve environmental gains at the expense of the workers most affected by the transition.
- Environmental organisations should support and amplify waste picker voices in policy processes, recognising that waste pickers are natural allies in advocacy for waste prevention and higher-order circular strategies.

3.5 *Producers*

Producers — including manufacturers, brand owners, and distributors — have the capacity and the responsibility to redesign their packaging and product systems for reuse. Under extended producer responsibility frameworks, they also carry financial obligations that must be structured to flow equitably to all workers in the reuse value chain, including informal collectors.

Responsibility and Design

- Producers must acknowledge reuse as a core responsibility under EPR frameworks, not as an optional or aspirational commitment. EPR instruments must be redesigned to allow reuse and refill as compliance pathways, giving producers both obligation and incentive to invest in reusable systems.
- Producers should invest in the design of packaging for reuse: durable, standardised, easily cleaned, and compatible with decentralised open-loop recovery. Design for reuse must not be a marketing exercise; it must translate into products that informal economy collectors can handle, sort, and sell at viable margins that surpass those for recycling.
- Standardised, interoperable packaging formats must be developed across product categories, enabling multiple use cycles including by informal sector actors who do not have access to brand-specific return infrastructure.
- Material composition must eliminate hazardous additives, sharp edges, and materials that pose health risks during collection, sorting, washing, or reprocessing. Occupational safety for informal workers must be a design criterion.

Funding and Co-Design

- Producers, under EPR, should guarantee the economic sustainability of inclusive reuse value chains by providing viability gap funding that ensures living-wage profits and improved environmental and occupational health standards.
- EPR funding must ensure equitable compensation across the entire reuse value chain, including handling fees, deposit premiums, and investment in infrastructure accessible to informal sector operators.
- Reuse systems should be co-designed with informal sector organisations. Centralised, brand-controlled return systems that bypass waste pickers must not be presented as inclusive reuse.
- Producers should not use the free labour of waste pickers in informal collection as a substitute for investment in well-designed, fairly compensated formal reuse systems.
- Inclusive standardisation frameworks must be developed that allow participation from small-scale and informal sector actors, not only large industrial operators.
- Design contradictions must be eliminated: reuse-labelled products must be genuinely reusable and compatible with decentralised recovery, not merely marketed as such while remaining functionally disposable.

Market Integration

- Businesses and enterprises in the green economy must be required to prioritise the inclusion of waste pickers in their supply chains. Where procurement decisions, EPR contracts, or reuse system concessions are made, waste picker enterprises should have access on fair terms.
- Producers should engage constructively with DRS design processes, ensuring that deposit levels are sufficient to incentivise collection and that access to the system is not designed in ways that structurally exclude informal collectors.

3.6 *Financiers*

Financiers — including impact investors, development finance institutions, EPR fund administrators, corporate CSR programmes, and public grant makers — have the capacity to determine whether inclusive reuse systems are viable or whether investment flows to models that exclude informal workers. Finance is a structural lever, and its deployment must be guided by both environmental and social return criteria.

Recognising Reuse as a High-Impact Investment Area

- Reuse should be recognised as a high-impact investment area delivering compounding environmental and social returns — not merely a niche sustainability initiative. The livelihood, waste diversion, and carbon emission data from existing thrift store, green event, and open-loop reuse models provide a compelling investment case.
- Financiers should move beyond isolated pilots and fund system integration — connecting collection, washing, storage, repair, and retail into coherent value chains that generate sustained income for waste picker enterprises.
- Long-term investment horizons and patient capital are necessary. Reuse systems require infrastructure, behaviour change, and market development that do not generate returns on short investment timelines.

Accessibility and Inclusion

- Finance mechanisms must be accessible to informal sector organisations. Conventional collateral requirements, reporting obligations, and institutional form criteria exclude cooperatives and associations from most existing financing instruments.
- Blended funding models — combining EPR levies, CSR contributions, public grants, and concessional debt — can make finance accessible to waste picker enterprises while achieving both environmental and social goals simultaneously.

- A harmonised blend of EPR and CSR funds, drawn from producer budgets, represents an efficient and equitable approach to financing inclusive reuse at scale.
- Low-interest loans and subsidies for waste picker organisations investing in reuse infrastructure — including storage facilities, washing equipment, transport, and retail fixtures — must be explicitly provided for in financing instruments.
- Funds provided to municipalities must come with conditions to support inclusive higher order strategies, such as reuse with waste pickers.

Equitable Distribution of Value

- Deposit-return systems must be designed to ensure fair distribution of value throughout the system. Unredeemed deposits should be reinvested into the system with priority given to equity-focused uses, including subsidising waste picker-led depots and operations.
- Financial instruments must not allow concentration of market power among large recyclers, intermediaries, or corporate operators at the expense of small-scale and informal actors. Speculative behaviour and market cornering must be actively discouraged through system design.
- Handling fees and per-unit premiums within DRS must be set at levels that reflect the true labour cost of collection, and must always be the financial responsibility of producers.

Behaviour Change and Technology

- Financiers should invest in awareness campaigns, behavioural nudges, and public communication that support reuse adoption, understanding that consumer behaviour change is a precondition for the viability of reuse systems — not a downstream outcome.
- Investment in technology should favour inclusive technologies that augment rather than replace labour. Where digital systems, automated sorting, or mechanised washing are funded, accompanying investment in labour transition support and upskilling for displaced workers is obligatory.
- Data systems that track material flows, livelihood outcomes, and equity metrics across reuse value chains should be funded as a core component of reuse infrastructure, not as an optional add-on.

3.7 *Urban Local Bodies*

Urban local bodies — municipal corporations, municipalities, and other local government institutions — are the primary implementing agency for solid waste systems and will be responsible for supporting the implementation of reuse systems on the ground. While national and state policy sets the overarching framework, it is urban local bodies that translate mandates into everyday practice through urban planning, licensing, collection systems, contracting, standards-setting, and enforcement. Their proximity to communities and direct control over city infrastructure make them uniquely positioned to enable — or foreclose — inclusive reuse.

Space Allocation and Urban Planning

- Urban planning processes must reserve space within city infrastructure for waste pickers' reuse activities, including thrift markets, second-hand stalls, and collection, washing if necessary, and storage facilities, preventing displacement by competing commercial interests or racist/classist demagogy.
- Decentralised spaces for collection, drop-off, laundering, storage, and sorting must be allocated to waste pickers and their organisations as primary operators, not to intermediaries or private contractors.
- Second-hand traders and thrift vendors must be able to operate in public and street markets without harassment or displacement; municipal authorities should designate permanent or regular spaces for such trade within existing public markets and commercial areas.

Outreach, Collection, and Source Segregation

- Education campaigns and special events targeting the local population, aimed at promoting reuse collaborations with waste pickers must be implemented.
- Clear public communication and convenient drop-off infrastructure in residential areas should complement these campaigns, strengthening the role of waste pickers in the reuse economy and improving the quality and quantity of materials available to them.
- Governance and enforcement through penalties for poorly segregated or contaminated reusable material should complement outreach efforts, minimising contamination and destruction of reusable goods.
- Urban waste collection schemes should Integrate waste pickers, for example by giving priority to waste picker-led hauling and cleaning services.

Formalisation, Licensing, and Market Support

- Licensing frameworks for thrift stores, second-hand traders, and repair services must be calibrated to the economic realities of waste pickers and other micro-players, including reduced regulatory fees and formal recognition of their contribution to both environmental outcomes and the municipal waste disposal budget.
- Corporate and community sponsors should be encouraged to support reuse initiatives, funding infrastructure or campaigns.
- Incentive structures — including procurement preferences, insurance support, and access to municipal storage facilities and land — should be established to support waste picker organisations competing for green event and reuse service contracts.

Institutional Partnership and Enforcement

- Sustained municipal support, alongside civil society coordination and grassroots participation, is essential to entrench waste pickers within local reuse systems, even where formal policy frameworks do not explicitly name them.
- Urban local bodies should formalise partnerships with waste picker organisations and cooperatives, institutionalising their proactive engagement in the design, governance, and implementation of local reuse systems rather than treating their participation as incidental.
- Municipal targets for material diversion through reuse, cascading from national and state frameworks, should be translated into local monitoring indicators and timelines, with waste pickers' contribution to these outcomes explicitly counted.

Conclusion

Reuse represents a genuinely transformative opportunity — to address plastic pollution at source, to generate dignified livelihoods for workers who are already performing essential circular economy functions, including reuse, and to demonstrate that environmental sustainability and social justice are not competing values but mutually reinforcing ones.

The evidence base surveyed in this chapter — from Pune and Bengaluru, from Ecuador and Italy, from Kenya, and North America — points to the same conclusion: inclusive reuse systems are possible, but they do not happen by default. They require structural decisions about system design, policy mandate, financing, and accountability that explicitly prioritise the workers most at risk of being excluded.

The three conditions for a just reuse transition are clear. First, structurally inclusive system design: collection, reuse infrastructure, packaging standards, logistics models, and employment pathways must be built to accommodate informal workers from the outset, not retrofitted after the fact. Second, strong policy recognition and enforcement: consumer behaviour change, producer accountability, and fair market conditions require binding policy instruments with clear targets for reuse and consistent enforcement. Third, equitable financing: the investment needed to make inclusive reuse viable must reach informal sector organisations through financial instruments designed for accessibility, not only those designed for scale.

If these conditions are met, reuse can serve as a powerful and replicable tool for both environmental protection and social equity. If they are not, reuse risks becoming another form of exclusion within the circular economy — delivering environmental gains for some at the cost of livelihoods for others. The choice is one of design, political will, and the seriousness with which the principle of just transition is applied in practice.

References

This position is based on the following case studies, with additional inputs from IAWP's Advocacy Subcommittee.

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