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ADVANCING A CIRCULAR ECONOMY AND EMPOWERING THE INFORMAL WASTE SECTOR

THE CHALLENGE

The informal waste sector is critical for creating a more circular economy and helping to end plastic pollution. Informal waste collectors (IWC) are the foundation of waste collection, sorting, and recycling—they are responsible for over half of all plastic waste collected and recycled globally. The informal waste sector is one of the world’s greatest defenses against ocean plastic pollution, especially in coastal, urban areas, and in places where the formal sector does not adequately respond to waste management needs. Despite their importance, IWCs are commonly overlooked, undervalued, and under resourced, facing major challenges such as:

Stigmatization, marginalization, and high risks – Across the world, especially in low- and middle-income countries, the informal waste sector usually represents the most vulnerable and socially disadvantaged groups in society. IWCs frequently face exploitation, social exclusion, and marginalization. Communities often see waste collection as a desperate source of daily living; collectors can be subject to stigma, harassment, and even violence. IWCs have little access to basic personal protective equipment (PPE) and tools—such as carts—increasing the risk associated with the work. Their activities are characterized by unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, low or irregular incomes, long working hours, and a lack of access to markets, finance, training, and technology.

Insufficient inclusion of IWCs in decision making – IWCs lack political and legal representation, which makes it difficult for them to influence decision making in solid waste management (SWM) policies. Major decisions that impact the waste sector and IWC livelihoods—such as dumpsite closures—are often made without IWC participation. During such critical transitions as dumpsite closures, the exclusion of IWCs can lead to the loss of local know-how, the breakup of recycling value chains, and the disruption of vital income generating activities for the poorest in society.

Barriers for women’s participation in the SWM sector – Women face structural barriers to fully participate in the SWM value chain. In both the formal and informal sectors, women lack access to finance, training, and market

AT A GLANCE

As many as **20 million people** worldwide work in the informal waste sector and are responsible for 58 percent of all plastic waste collected and recycled globally.

Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (CCBO) has increased the capacity of almost **2,000 informal waste collectors**—improving their health and safety, livelihoods, and technical skills while expanding local waste services.

information, as well as the ability to move into leadership roles. They collect lower value plastics, earn lower wages than their male colleagues, and face widespread discrimination and sexual harassment and violence (further decreasing their full participation). As the predominant collectors and sorters of waste, women work in dangerous conditions with little or no PPE, doing the riskiest work for the lowest pay while disproportionately burdened with childcare and household responsibilities.

Impact of global trends on IWC livelihoods – IWC livelihoods are highly vulnerable to global trends and events such as volatile oil prices, COVID-19 and the resulting recession, and the effects of climate change. These realities have resulted in a waning market demand for recyclables and are compounded by increased competition for waste sector jobs to replace other sources of lost income.

OUR APPROACH

USAID’s Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (CCBO) program, in partnership with local grantees, is empowering IWCs and increasing their access to the resources and recognition they deserve. With a large portion of the world population—at least 2 billion people—lacking access to formal SWM systems, the activities of the informal waste sector are critical to reducing problems caused by uncollected municipal solid waste. If the challenges to the informal waste sector can be addressed, its workforce can become a key partner in a global circular economy and contribute to mitigating health and environmental impacts of plastic pollution as well as enhancing economic and human development. CCBO solutions include:



Providing technical assistance and equipment that optimize collection and promote safe working conditions. With the proper tools and equipment, IWCs can be empowered to collect more plastics in safe conditions and to regard themselves—and be regarded by others—as professionals, empowering IWCs to develop skills and confidence. CCBO provides local grants for equipment, including bicycles and small waste trucks, and PPE that is co-designed and customized to IWC needs. In the Philippines, one of CCBO’s grantees, Project Zacchaeus, partnered with 60 local IWCs—now regarded as “Eco-Warriors”—to co-create customized IWC uniforms that offer protection and brand IWCs as professionals to be respected. Technical training was coupled with other activities, such as interpersonal communication and empowerment trainings, to build agency and confidence.



Advancing the participation of women in the waste sector. USAID is committed to empowering IWCs, many of whom are women. The Women in Waste Economic Empowerment activity helps build women’s capacity to participate and lead in SWM through business, leadership, and skills training; business plan coaching; mentorship; funding support; and links to market opportunities. In addition to creating green jobs as women expand and staff their businesses, these new businesses are expanding waste services to areas where waste collection services currently do not exist—and where dumping causes a serious threat to the environment and human health.



Creating locally-led solutions and partnerships that advance IWC success. USAID firmly believes that local solutions, and enabling IWCs to connect with national and city governments, the private sector, and other organizations, are key to building strong SWM systems. For example, in Vietnam, CCBO grantee, Asian Society Social Improvement and Sustainable Transformation (ASSIST) seeks to create an innovative public-private partnership that integrates IWCs into municipal waste operations at community material recovery facilities, transfer stations, or at the landfill. ASSIST seeks to boost demand for recyclable plastics by engaging end markets (national and international recyclers), creating a trading platform, and supporting IWCs to increase collection of separated and cleaned material that meets demand standards.

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