

SDG 11

To ensure sustainable waste services, we must value waste workers and make sure they are in decent jobs

BY DARIA CIBRARIO, PUBLIC SERVICES INTERNATIONAL (PSI)

Waste collection and management are essential public services for every community and are necessary for the protection of public health and the environment. Quality waste-related services are critical to urban management and policies, they underpin thriving local economies and are vital to ensure public spaces can be enjoyed by everyone. Whenever urban waste services and management systems are poor or fail, inhabitants suffer bad living conditions – especially those in the poorest neighbourhoods and slums – and social discontent rises. It is no surprise the issue of waste services is often a hot topic in local government elections worldwide.

As urbanization and consumption rates increase and natural resources shrink, the public's view of waste has moved from an inevitable consequence of industrialized economies to a precious, reusable resource. This shift is exemplified by the growing worldwide interest and investment in the 'circular economy,'¹ not only by policy-makers, but also by business, social enterprises² and civil society. The scientific evidence and shocking images of the impact of the 8 million tons of plastic that end up in the oceans every year³ on marine ecosystems and the food chain

have spurred international outrage and a global call to clean up the mess and halt disaster by securing global regulation, proper solid waste services and responsible consumption everywhere.

Within the current global policy frameworks, waste services prominently feature in the targets and indicators of both SDG 11 and SDG 12, notably with commitments to prevent, reduce, recycle and reuse – as well as to properly collect and discharge – urban solid waste and halve global food waste by 2030; and to properly handle and treat chemical and other hazardous waste through the whole life cycle in accordance with international standards by 2020.⁴ They also figure under the transformative commitments made by UN Habitat member states in the 2016 New Urban Agenda (NUA), which pledges to realize universal access to sustainable waste management systems, minimizing landfills and converting waste into energy, with special attention to coastal areas.⁵

Circular economy hype vs. invisible waste workers

While the importance and visibility of waste services is now clearly and widely acknowledged, it is disconcerting to note that the women and men who deliver them daily to communities – be they municipal public workers, private provider workers or informal waste workers (often referred to as 'waste pickers')

1 The EU describes the circular economy as follows: "In a circular economy, the value of products and materials is maintained for as long as possible. Waste and resource use are minimised, and when a product reaches the end of its life, it is used again to create further value. This can bring major economic benefits, contributing to innovation, growth and job creation." (https://ec.europa.eu/growth/industry/sustainability/circular-economy_en)

2 The Plastic Bank (www.plasticbank.org/).

3 IUCN (2017).

4 SDG targets 11.6, 12.3, 12.4, and 12.5 (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg11> and <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg12>).

5 UN General Assembly (2016), para. 34, 71, 74, 121-123.

- remain largely invisible, unrecognized and often without a voice at work.

Waste services jobs are among the toughest and most dangerous professions worldwide. Waste workers keep communities and the environment safe and clean, and recover materials to everyone's benefit, often putting their own physical and mental health at stake. Daily risks include accidental cuts, biological and medical waste contamination, poisoning by chemical substances and heavy metals, bites from animals and insects and ergonomic and musculo-skeletal injuries. Fatal and invalidating accidents are common occurrences because of traffic, falls from the collection truck and crushing during the compacting phase. Stress due to workload and violence by service users and street crime are common, with a special vulnerability for women waste workers.

Crews can be severely understaffed and machinery such as mechanical bin lifters and compactors defaulting or under-maintained due to lack of investment or resources by the municipality or the private provider. Protective equipment, sanitation facilities and occupational health and safety training are often inadequate or non-existent, especially when there is no trade union recognition or collective bargaining with the employer. Waste workers also routinely experience prejudice in some communities and are looked down upon by some for the nature of their work. A Brazilian waste services union leader affiliated to PSI, referring to his distinctive municipal waste worker outfit, emblematically said: "Every day I wear a colourful and bright uniform I am proud of. But when I have it on while working in the street I feel invisible."⁶

6 "Sindicatos de América Latina exigen condiciones de trabajo dignas para el sector de gestión de residuos municipales" (www.world-psi.org/es/sindicatos-de-america-latina-exigen-condiciones-de-trabajo-dignas-para-el-sector-de-gestion-de).

A global decent work deficit in the waste services sector

According to a 2017 PSI report,⁷ there is very limited data on municipal waste service workers. This is because local and regional government labour statistics are patchy and municipalities do not systematically collect them, including those on waste services.⁸ While there is a clear knowledge gap in waste workers' employment numbers and working conditions, overall, workers along the waste services spectrum and global supply chain endure a huge decent work⁹ deficit, precariousness and serious health risks. Many work for poverty wages, cannot afford to live where they work and are forced to commute long hours or live in slums. The wide majority are denied labour rights.

Among them, informal waste workers face particularly appalling conditions and severe marginalization, unacceptable health and safety risks, economic insecurity and no social protection unless they are members of a union or organized into cooperatives. Estimated at over 20 million worldwide, they are "the only source of waste collection in some developing countries"¹⁰ where formal waste management services are as yet non-existent or not implemented.

Within this context, the following policy recommendations can improve waste workers' lives and working conditions, while ensuring quality waste services to users and communities.

7 Lethbridge (2017).

8 Pavanelli (2017).

9 Decent work is defined by the ILO as employment that is "productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men" (www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm).

10 Dias (2018).

1. Uphold the labour rights of waste workers and value the profession

Waste workers' conditions greatly improve when they can benefit from trade union representation and enter dialogue and collective bargaining with their employers.¹¹ Governments and businesses alike have a human rights responsibility to provide decent working conditions to waste workers, including adequate health and safety, social security and a living wage. Conversely, they can greatly benefit from constructive dialogue with waste workers and their unions who know best the needs and expectations of the communities they serve and the challenges to ensuring quality waste services.¹²

Waste workers are prominent allies in the setup and implementation of successful integrated municipal waste management plans and in realizing the promises of the circular economy. The establishment of joint workplace occupational health and safety committees is a key aspect of such mutually beneficial worker-employer dialogue, where risks for both the community and the workers can be rapidly raised and addressed to everyone's benefit. Waste workers can be amazing sustainability ambassadors and deliver practical education on waste reduction, reuse and recycling to local communities, schools and institutions. In return, governments and business need to ensure their employability through adequate professionalization paths and programmes, and address the victimization they may suffer in some communities by proactively conveying a positive image of their role and work.¹³

11 Zimring (2018).

12 Interview with Urbano Dini, Director, Integrated Ecological Services, SEI Siena, Italy, "Guardians of the city", PSI movie 2017 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=9d_Bbsv2b0g&feature=youtu.be).

13 An example: PSI "Municipal Workers Make Cities Happen" visual campaign, waste worker poster "Making sustainability happen", 31 October 2017 (www.world-psi.org/sites/default/files/psi_lrg_poster_a3_wasteserviceworkers_0.pdf).

2. Draw up national and local waste management plans that are inclusive of all stakeholders in the waste supply chain

Countries such as Brazil have developed national solid waste plans in a view to bolster recycling rates and include informal workers within the formal municipal waste systems. Some cities do the same in their own municipal plans and urban policies. While this certainly is a positive and necessary step, the role and needs of formal waste workers often do not receive the same attention, and bridges to facilitate the progressive transition of informal workers into formal waste service employment are limited. Truly inclusive plans need to encompass the participation of all waste workers, be they formal (public and private) or informal, along with their unions and associations; as well as of service users from all concerned neighbourhoods and communities, including those in disadvantaged areas and slums.

3. Tap into the circular economy to create quality employment and transition informal waste workers into formality

The labour-intensive nature of waste services and recycling – such as door-to-door and bottle deposit systems - provides major opportunities to ensure the socio-economic inclusion of informal waste workers through the creation of quality jobs. UN data from 101 countries shows that only 65 percent of the urban population was served by municipal waste collection in 2009, and in many developing regions less than 50 percent of solid waste is safely disposed of.¹⁴ Global recycling rates for plastics are still token at around 9 percent while 79 percent is buried in landfills or discarded in the environment.¹⁵ There is clearly an urgent need for more waste services and management workers everywhere and the jobs created must be decent.

The inclusion of informal waste workers in national and local integrated waste management systems is a positive and necessary step; yet it is not enough

14 UN (2016), para. 81.

15 Parker (2017).

as it does not tackle the root causes of informality. Informal waste work is often the only survival option for the poor and the marginalized, or a buffer for unprotected workers hit by economic downturn, but is by no means decent employment.¹⁶ Integrated waste management plans should encompass viable mechanisms to facilitate formalization - a transformative commitment of the NUA¹⁷ - and ensure full access to rights and decent work for informal waste workers so that they can sustainably lift themselves and their families out of poverty. When municipalities systematically resort to informal work that pays poverty wages in order to keep down the labour costs of providing regular municipal waste services, informal workers get locked into the poverty loop and everyone loses.¹⁸

4. Secure a sustainable stream of finance for waste services and policy coherence across different levels of government

Waste services often represent a major - sometimes the largest - share of municipal budgets. It is not uncommon for waste services and waste workers to find themselves at the crossroads of conflicting political and economic interests, especially during political campaigns, ending up in concessions with a duration bound to political cycles. A sustainable stream of local government financing for waste services¹⁹ and thought-through incentives to set up effective waste services are often linked to service quality and decent working conditions. Conversely, the lack of investment in tools, machinery maintenance, protective equipment and worker training have direct negative consequences on workers' health and safety and are highly correlated with precariousness, job outsourcing/privatization and low wages. Incon-

sistencies across legislative frameworks (national, regional and local) underpinning municipal waste management plans are a jeopardizing factor for service quality and waste workers' conditions. In Argentina, municipal waste management plans are often not implemented because they depend principally on provincial government human and financial resource allocations and investment in infrastructure.²⁰ International financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF and development agencies have a responsibility to ensure that the funding they put into national and local waste services generates decent employment and ensures that they remain a public service in the interest of the people, not private shareholders.

5. Keep waste service in public hands

The weight of waste services on municipal budgets, their labour-intensive nature and the questionable promises of privatization²¹ have tempted many municipalities into public private partnerships. Yet, privatization can prove very disappointing when it comes to sustainable waste service delivery, ending in higher costs for municipalities, loss of in-house knowhow and quality control, and poor working conditions, as private operators consistently turn to labour cost reductions and automation as profit-making strategies.²² This is what happened in Oslo (Norway), which remunicipalized its waste services in 2017;²³ Conception Bay South (Canada) in 2011;²⁴ and Asuncion (Paraguay) in 2003.²⁵ In all three cases, municipal waste workers' unions played a pivotal role in supporting community demands for quality services and in defending working conditions.

As an essential public service, waste management should stay public, be transparent and involve the participation of users, communities and workers with a view to improving service on a continuous

¹⁶ ILO (2002).

¹⁷ UN General Assembly (2016), para. 59.

¹⁸ A 2010 UN Habitat report says in its foreword: "The informal recycling sector ... may save the city as much as 15 to 20% of its waste management budget by reducing the amount of waste that would otherwise have to be collected and disposed of by the city." (UN Habitat (2010)).

¹⁹ Among the most common schemes to finance municipal waste services are property tax, electricity or water bills, direct billing or a combination of these.

²⁰ Lethbridge (2017), p. 11.

²¹ European Court of Auditors (2018).

²² Hall (2015).

²³ Pettersen/Monsen (2017).

²⁴ CUPE (2017).

²⁵ Maffei (2018).

basis and securing accountability. The recent Mexico City Constitution adopted in February 2017 gives the municipality full responsibility to provide waste services free of charge, prohibiting privatization and outsourcing and enshrining mutual recognition between the municipality and labour unions.²⁶ Public-public partnerships and inter-municipal consortiums are promising models to ensure mutual support among small and medium municipalities while sharing the costs of infrastructure and administration. Since 2006, such a consortium reunites six small municipalities of the Argentinean province of Chubut which have developed a shared, integrated solid urban waste services plan and set up a recycling system in the area.²⁷

Conclusion

There is a strong case for all waste workers – be they formal or informal - to seek cooperative and complementary roles in the waste supply chain, joining forces and standing up together in solidarity for decent work across the whole waste workers' spectrum, while promoting a quality public waste service that works in the common interest. It is high time to give back a face, dignity and decent working conditions to all waste workers worldwide. National, regional and local governments, business employers, international financial institutions and agencies, as well as the relevant UN agencies, have the primary responsibility to make sure this happens.

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²⁶ Mexico City Constitution, February 2017 (in Spanish) (www.cdmx.gob.mx/storage/app/uploads/public/59a/588/5d9/59a5885d9b2c7133832865.pdf).

²⁷ Lethbridge (2017), p. 33.

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Daria Cibrario is Policy Officer, Local and Regional Government Sector and Multinational Enterprises, Public Services International (PSI).