

# EMPOWERING WASTE WORKERS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE PORT PREMISES

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BRIEFER 7

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# BRIEFER INTRODUCTION

Plastic pollution is among one of the most pressing environmental challenges. A wide range of solutions, ranging from redesigning products to improving collection and recycling, are needed to tackle it.

To address this, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) launched a three-year project named **“Clean Ports, Clean Oceans: Improving Port Waste Management in the Philippines”** (hereinafter “the project”) as part of their commitment to No Plastic in Nature Initiative. The project was implemented in partnership with the Grieg Group and was funded by the Grieg Foundation. It aimed to reduce plastic waste leakage in three Philippine ports – Batangas, Cagayan de Oro, and Manila North.

As part of the project, WWF has undertaken baseline studies on the generation and management of waste in ports in the Philippines, that identified the pivotal role of waste workers within the plastic value chain. The studies emphasized the **significance of integrating waste workers** in the improvement of the waste management system. As a result, a key project intervention involved the engagement of waste workers, to enhance plastic waste collection and recycling within port areas and ensure that the project activities do not negatively impact their livelihoods.

This brief, published by WWF-Philippines, aims to share the experience and lessons learned from the project in working with informal and formal waste workers in ports and communities living around the ports on the topic of plastic waste reduction and management.

# TARGET STAKEHOLDERS

Waste workers, both in the formal and informal sectors, are essential in the existing waste management system within and outside the port premises. They usually play a vital role in the collection, sorting, and recycling of waste generated by port facilities and communities.

## **1** Formal waste workers such as utility workers

In the ports, the primary responsibility for handling and managing waste from bins to collection trucks lies with the utility workers who are part of the janitorial services. They are considered as part of the formal sector since they are contracted and hired by the port to do those duties. These dedicated workers play a crucial role in waste management within the port facilities. Their tasks include collecting and compiling all garbage bags from designated bins and transferring the waste to designated collection points. Additionally, they may also assist in loading the waste onto collection trucks for proper disposal or recycling.

Moreover, these utility workers also actively contribute to the recycling process by sorting and separately collecting high-value recyclables such as paper, glass, metal, and plastics. These valuable materials are then sent to junkshops or materials recovery facilities (MRFs) where they can be recycled and repurposed, promoting a more sustainable waste management approach.

The waste workers are also responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the port area. They regularly refill garbage bags in waste bins to ensure proper waste containment, and they diligently sweep litter and improperly disposed waste to keep the surroundings tidy.

## **2** Informal waste workers

In the communities within and outside the ports, there are informal waste workers who are also often residents of these areas. These individuals are actively involved in the collection and recovery of waste from both households and non-households as part of their daily livelihood. Some of these waste workers serve as waste collectors, catering to areas that are not regularly serviced by the collection trucks due to limited access. Additionally, some of these waste workers focus on collecting and recovering high-value recyclables, which they then sell to junkshops. This aspect of their work allows them to earn income from the sale of valuable materials, encouraging their active participation in recycling efforts.

## IDENTIFICATION OF THE WASTE WORKERS IN THE AREA

In the port, it is important to first **identify all the waste workers including the utility workers and informal waste collectors** within and outside the port, as they can significantly become beneficiaries of the effective and sustainable solutions to the solid waste management system.

Engaging the waste workers may provide them opportunities for livelihood, additional income, and employment.



An informal waste worker selling her collected recyclables in a junkshop

# EVALUATE THEIR KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND COMMON ASKS

Waste workers possess an in-depth understanding of the current waste management practices within the port and its surroundings, as they are directly involved in the collection, recovery, and loading of waste to the collection trucks. Their firsthand experience and knowledge can provide valuable insights and inputs for designing waste management strategies that are tailored to the specific needs and challenges of the port area. For instance, utility workers in Batangas have the advantage of identifying the most common waste, including plastic items, generated in their assigned facilities. This knowledge allows them to determine which recyclables should be prioritized for collection. Therefore, it is crucial to assess their expertise and competencies to pinpoint their potential roles and responsibilities to the interventions to be implemented.

## PROVIDE FAIR AND SAFE WORKING CONDITIONS

It is also important to identify the needs of the waste workers. Common asks from waste workers revolve around improving their current working conditions, ensuring fair treatment, fair wages, and incentives, as well as receiving necessary support to carry out their waste management duties effectively. In response to their needs, the following supports can be provided to waste workers:

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- **Improvement of health and safety measures:** waste workers often request **better health and safety measures** to safeguard themselves from potential hazards and risks while handling waste, especially sharp objects, broken glass, and other hazardous materials that may be improperly disposed of without adequate cover. To address this, providing personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, boots, masks, conducting health and safety training, and offering regular health check-ups can enhance their well-being and safety. This should be an integral component of the health and social safeguard mechanisms of any solid waste management project or system.
  - **Provision of wages, competitive prices for recyclables, and incentives:** working in the waste sector exposes utility workers to hazards while keeping the areas clean. To support them, it is crucial to provide **wages that include mandatory benefits** such as health benefits and insurance. Additionally, for waste workers in the community who collect recyclables, offering **competitive prices for the recyclables** they gather can incentivize and promote recycling efforts. Moreover, recognizing and rewarding waste workers who contribute to increasing waste diversion in both the port and communities through incentives such as monetary rewards and in-kind goods such as rice grains can further encourage their active involvement in sustainable waste management practices.
  - **Provision of essential tools and equipment:** to enhance the **efficiency and safety of waste workers**, it is essential to provide them with proper tools and equipment. This includes furnishing waste collection bins, collection carts, and trolleys, as well as equipping them with necessary safety gear, sorting tables, tongs, and other essential items.
  - **Social support and engagement:** waste workers deserve **meaningful support and recognition from port management offices and communities**. Acknowledging and respecting their crucial role in waste management is essential for fostering a positive working environment. Engaging them in activities related to solid waste management, such as collection events, Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) trainings, World Environment Day celebrations, and other relevant initiatives, further reinforces their sense of purpose and involvement in waste management efforts.

# EMPOWERMENT OF WASTE WORKERS

## Informal waste workers

Empowering informal waste workers could have positive environmental, economic, and social outcomes.

The contribution of informal waste workers to efficient solid waste management systems and circular waste management solutions is significant. They are often engaged in volunteerism or self-employment and play a key role in the waste management system by often supplementing the formal municipal solid waste management system, increasing waste segregation and collection, and consequently reducing the environmental economic and societal costs of uncontrolled leaking into the environment, open burning of waste and high amount of waste in landfills.

Empowering informal waste workers could be done in many ways. For instance by improving their working conditions in providing basic equipment to help them to carry out their work more efficiently and in a safer way, improving the financial benefits that they receive or providing training to strengthen their capacity to understand the market. Empowering them strengthens their position, their capacity to conduct their activities, and consequently increases positive environmental outcomes. It gives them also more possibilities to share their knowledge on the waste management system with other stakeholders.

## Empowering informal waste worker through Plastic Bank

WWF Philippines collaborated with the Plastic Bank to empower the participation of informal waste workers in communities within the port, particularly in Barangay 20 in the City of Manila along with the provision of additional tools of trade for the workers. Through the Plastic Bank program, these workers **receive support and are connected to the nearest established or Plastic Bank-accredited junkshop**, enabling them to sell their recyclables at competitive prices. Additionally, Plastic Bank has provided the workers with collection carts to aid in their waste collection efforts and other incentives from Plastic Bank, including rice rations, vitamins, and personal protective equipment (PPE) [1].

One of the program's success stories is Ms. 'Marites'. As a single parent, she had been working in the informal waste industry for several years to support her family's daily needs. Working alone was initially challenging for her as she collected recyclables from households in the community and brought them to the nearest junkshop. However, **after becoming part of the Plastic Bank program, she feels empowered** to be associated with an organization that understands and shares her experiences.

With the support of the Plastic Bank, she can now **monitor her collection progress and income** through a mobile app provided by the organization. The introduction of a collection cart has further enhanced her efficiency in waste collection.

This story exemplifies how the engagement of informal waste workers' participation and their connection to the Plastic Bank program can positively impact their lives. By providing them with tools, resources, and access to fair pricing for their recyclables, the program empowers and uplifts these workers, allowing them to make a meaningful contribution to waste management and supporting their families' well-being.

[1] WWF Philippines (2022) May pera sa basura. Retrieved from <https://wwf.org.ph/resource-center/story-archives-2023/may-pera-sa-basura/>.



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## Formal workers

The empowerment of formal workers is also crucial as they have a pivotal role in the waste management system. These workers including the utility workers within the port have been tasked to collect and deliver waste to designated collection points, reducing the chances of uncollected waste within the facilities they are assigned to. They have established roles in the port waste management but they can be empowered by **providing them with such materials and infrastructure to carry out their tasks more efficiently and more safely**. For example, these formal workers can benefit from the provision of collection carts, which would allow them to transport heavy garbage bags to collection points without the need for manual lifting. Additionally, supplying segregation bins would facilitate the easy grouping of recyclables for delivery during collection events. Similar to the informal waste workers, empowering these formal workers deepens their understanding of waste management, strengthens their capacity to carry out their activities, and ultimately leads to more positive environmental consequences such as reduced plastic leakage.

### The Active Roles of Utility Workers in WWF Philippines' Implemented Interventions to Ports of Batangas, Cagayan de Oro, and Manila North

Throughout the project 'Clean Ports, Clean Oceans: Improving Port Waste Management in the Philippines' the participation of utility workers has been instrumental in the activities aiming at improving the waste management system.

The key participation of utility workers included:

### Collection events:

WWF-Philippines collaborated with an entity called Basic Environmental Systems and Technologies, Inc. (BEST) [2] in Port of Cagayan de Oro and an organization called The Plastic Flamingo [3] in the Ports of Batangas and Manila North to organize events where recyclable materials were collected. These events involved the gathering of recyclables and potentially recyclable residuals over a specified period. The utility workers, alongside port employees, actively participated in these collection events. During a monitoring activity held in May 2023, the **waste workers demonstrated a strong passion for these initiatives**. They proudly showcased the recyclables they had collected and separated, which were to be handed over to partner organizations.

The Port of Cagayan de Oro highlighted the **positive impact of the collection events** on the waste workers. It was emphasized that these events have significantly improved their skills in waste sorting, making them more efficient in their waste management duties. Furthermore, the **financial incentive program** introduced by BEST has been instrumental in **boosting their motivation and active participation** in collecting a substantial amount of recyclables generated within the port.

### Use and maintenance of segregation bins:

Several waste bins made from recyclable materials were strategically deployed within the port facilities to enhance waste segregation. These bins are designated for biodegradable, recyclable, residual, and special waste, each equipped with infographic guides to help users identify the appropriate category for their waste items. The utility workers **actively collect waste from offices** and other areas within the port and **responsibly sort** and place them into the segregation bins according to their respective categories. Their commitment to maintaining these segregation bins has been commendable. Furthermore, they have **taken on the role of educators**, guiding and enlightening other port employees about the correct waste categories and encouraging them to dispose of waste in the appropriate bins.

[2] [Environmental Services | Waste Management | Basic Environmental Systems and Technologies Inc. \(BEST\)](#).

[3] [The Plastic Flamingo \(theplaf.com\)](http://theplaf.com).

# COMMON MISTAKES IN ENGAGING INFORMAL WASTE WORKERS

Some common mistakes in engaging informal waste workers include:

## **Short-Term Engagement without Long-Term Plan:**

Engaging waste workers in short-term activities without any long-term plans for their integration into formal solid waste management can hinder their progress. When the support abruptly stops, waste workers may be forced to return to their old ways of working, undoing any progress made during the short-term engagement.

## **Limited Opportunities for Growth and Advancement:**

Many waste workers have been deprived of quality basic education, which limits their options to certain low-skilled activities within the waste management sector.

## **Lack of Recognition and Respect:**

Engaging the waste workers while failing to acknowledge their significant role in waste management and not showing them the respect they deserve can lead to their discouragement and reduced commitment to their duties. This can be prevented by providing their common asks.

# CONCLUSION

Waste workers have consistently proven themselves as champions of waste management, both within and outside the port premises. Despite facing challenges such as limited resources and potential exposure to waste-related hazards, they remain steadfast in their commitment to contribute to waste collection and diversion, effectively preventing waste leakage into the environment.

To empower waste workers, several interventions can be implemented. These include identifying all waste workers, encompassing utility workers and informal collectors, and assessing their needs. Additionally, evaluating their knowledge and skills will direct training efforts where they are most essential. Integrating these workers into waste management activities not only sustains their livelihoods but also taps into their invaluable on-ground insights, leveraging their competencies to enhance overall waste management within ports and communities. A crucial aspect of this strategy is monitoring and evaluation, which will be instrumental in tracking the effectiveness of these efforts and making informed adjustments for continuous improvement.