



Inclusion of Informal Waste Workers (IWWs) in the transition to sustainable waste management

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DISCLAIMERS

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This issue brief outlines the lessons learned from the workshop “Lessons Learned from Pilot Projects Working with Women Informal Waste Workers in Viet Nam”, co-hosted by UNDP Viet Nam, and the EU-BMZ ‘Rethinking Plastics’ project in April 2022 in Quy Nhon. The primary objective of the workshop was to deepen the understanding of the roles and contributions of informal waste workers (IWWs) in the waste management value chains and to invite local actors and stakeholders to share their experiences.

The issue brief was written by Marie Lan Nguyen Leroy, with inputs from Morgane Rivoal (UNDP Viet Nam), Fanny Quertamp (Expertise France), and Nguyen Tuan Luong (UNDP Viet Nam). It was designed by Nguyen Tung Lam (UNDP Viet Nam).

Mrs. Vo Thi Le at her collection point in Ly Hung Hamlet (Binh Dinh Province)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following the revision of the Law on Environmental Protection (LEP) in 2020, new provisions anchoring waste management to the process of the circular economy are being implemented such as plastic waste reduction, waste sorting obligations, and the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policy for packaging which will come into effect in 2024. The EPR will fundamentally affect the waste collection, sorting and recycling system in Viet Nam, which is partially undertaken by the informal sector.

In this context, it is critical to reconsider the integration of collectors into the waste management system. As key players, they are actively contributing to decreasing the amount of waste which winds up in the environment, and by doing so, reducing the financial burden for municipalities. Nevertheless, they are not officially recognized by public authorities, an issue which has been identified as a major bottleneck for the Informal Waste Workers (IWWs) in accessing social services. This informal workforce, most of which are women, is vulnerable to waste price fluctuations, land occupation issues, health injuries and suffers from social stigma.

Drawings on the lessons learned from pilot projects and findings from the workshop in Quy Nhon, this brief offers recommendations for provincial and central policymakers, to strengthen the livelihoods of informal waste workers and support their inclusion in evolving waste management systems.

Firstly, there is a need to recognize the roles, and include the voices, of informal waste workers in the upcoming waste management policies. These pilot projects uncovered the critical roles of informal waste workers and call for better recognition of IWWs as a workforce that can contribute to the EPR system and more broadly, to the transition toward a circular economy.

Secondly, the whole supporting ecosystem shall join hands in improving the working conditions of the collectors to accelerate efficiency. IWWs need financial facilities, adequate working space, access to professional equipment supplies, support to register or to join legal entities, and access to social benefits.

Lastly, the integration of IWWs in the waste management system is a complex and multi-faceted process requiring a coordinated approach. Therefore, it necessitates the involvement of the public sector at the national and the local levels in linking with the IWW and ensuring their inclusion, the private sector to facilitate their access to waste, the academic community to generate and disseminate specific knowledge, and the engagement of NGO/CSOs/development partners in delivering capacity building, advocacy messages, and supporting (re)structuration.

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Ms. Nguyen Thi Lien at her facility in Ly Chanh Hamlet (Binh Dinh Province), showing her booklet of waste sales and purchase, as implemented in UNDP/GEF – Small Grants Programme in Quy Nhon's plastic waste management project.

1 IWWS IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES

1.1 THE IMPACTS OF THE LAW ON ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION 2020 (LEP)

Adopted in November 2020, the revised Law on Environmental Protection (LEP) provides an institutional basis for new regulations on sustainable waste management in Viet Nam, initiating a roadmap for the transition toward a circular economy. It affirms the importance of "reducing the generation, enhancing the reuse and recycling of waste" as a guiding principle¹ and incorporates specific provisions for single-use plastic waste reduction.

In Decree No. 08/2022/ND-CP detailing articles of the LEP, the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) principles are introduced in Viet Nam as a mandatory environmental policy, specifying the responsibilities of producers and importers concerning the recycling and treatment of discarded products and packages. The producers will be obliged to pay financial contributions which will indirectly contribute to the waste management system (collection, sorting, recovery, and final disposal). Additionally, the Decree includes the roadmap for the circular economy, EPR, and Single-use Plastics (SUP) elimination; strengthens the management of importing SUP and SUP waste, limits dumpsites and tightens their operational regulations.

The LEP further requests households to sort waste into three categories: reusable and recyclable waste, organic waste, and other waste. To promote reduction and recycling, waste fees will be calculated based on the weight or volume. Households shall dispose of waste in approved bags only. According to the Law, recyclable waste will be transferred to "establishments with the function of collecting and transporting household solid waste"².

These upcoming regulations will influence the collection and sorting of recyclable solid waste. As a direct consequence of the regulations, demand will increase for waste collection and waste recycling³. With the EPR system, the price of recyclable materials is likely to increase as producers and importers are required to recycle these items⁴. The development of the recycling industry with new funding from the private sector may create opportunities for the socio-economic integration of informal waste workers. However, it may also pose many challenges and risks for the collectors and aggregators as currently, they often do not meet the technical and environmental requirements of the EPR system.

1 Article 4, Law on Environmental Protection, number 72/2020/QH14

2 Article 75, Law on Environmental Protection, number 72/2020/QH14

3 Presentation of Mr. Nguyen Thi, Legal Department, Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MONRE)

4 Presentation of Ms. Nguyen Thi Hoai Linh, ENDA



Informal waste workers of Nhon Hai, Ghenh Rang, Nhon Ly, and Nhon Chau Communes (Binh Dinh, Binh Duong, and Quang Ninh Provinces)

1.2 CHANGES IN WASTE COLLECTION SYSTEM UNDER THE FUTURE EPR SCHEME

The implementation of the EPR system for the packaging sector relies on different requirements. Waste management operators (which may include operators from the informal sector) shall collect, sort and recycle packaging following environmental standards defined by the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MONRE) and fulfill a strict accreditation process, thus ensuring high-quality recycling. Under the EPR scheme, there is also a need for a high level of traceability and transparency in order to monitor material and financial flows along the supply chain and ensure that producers are compliant with their obligations⁵. Hence, all organizations, companies, and facilities involved in the system would need to keep records of inputs and outputs to be auditable by a thirdparty structure. EPR regulations will also require waste management operators to be registered and have legal status and an environmental permit covering aggregation and recycling activities as prescribed by the LEP must be obtained.

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