

Inclusive Waste Governance in Nigeria: Leveraging Informal Waste Workers for a Functional Circular Economy

NOVEMBER 2025

Executive Summary:

Nigeria's urban waste management operates as a hybrid formal and informal economy. Informal waste workers provide most of the last-mile collection, sorting, and recovery of recyclable materials. Formal municipal services remain overstretched and under-resourced. Recycling markets depend heavily on informal labour to source materials. Despite this central role, informal waste workers remain unrecognised, criminalised, and excluded from planning, investment, and circular economy frameworks.



Photo: Female waste sorting and aggregation workers at the Chanja Datti Recycling Company, Abuja, Nigeria
 Credit: Aniebiet Obot

Central Role of Informal Waste Workers in Nigeria's Waste Management Ecosystem

The study finds that government, private recyclers, social enterprises, and waste workers all agree on one fact: informal actors are essential. Institutions recognise this, and the private sector depends on their labour, but current systems do not give legal status, protection, or partnerships.

This policy brief contends that Nigeria's shift to a circular economy requires formal recognition, protection, and partnership with informal waste workers. Inclusive waste governance is the most practical path to increased collection efficiency, higher recycling rates, reduced pollution, and improved livelihoods.

Core Policy Action:

Federal and State Governments should legally recognise informal waste workers as environmental service providers and integrate them into waste collection and recycling systems through registration, protection from harassment, inclusive service contracts, health and safety support, and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)-funded infrastructure.

Introduction: Nigeria's Waste Crisis and the Invisible Workforce

Nigeria generates tens of millions of tonnes of municipal solid waste each year. Collection efficiency in many cities remains between 40 and 50 per cent. National recycling rates remain below 10 per cent, and plastics recycling is often in the single digits. Rapid urbanisation, infrastructure gaps, weak data systems, and fragmented mandates have overwhelmed formal waste services.^{1,2}

In practice, Nigeria's waste system survives through a vast informal economy of waste pickers, collectors, aggregators, and sorters who recover valuable materials from streets, households, markets, and dumpsites. These workers function as the country's de facto last-mile collection and recycling network.

Despite their scale and contribution, official waste strategies, circular economy plans, and investment frameworks rarely include informal waste workers. Authorities often treat them as illegal actors, harassing, evicting, and excluding them.

¹Jarau, A. (August 1, 2021). NESREA raises alarm over Nigeria's rising solid waste. Voice of Nigeria Broadcasting Service. <https://von.gov.ng/index.php/2021/08/15/nesrea-raises-alarm-over-nigerias-rising-solid-waste/>.
²HQ, F. (October 27, 2023). Waste management and climate change. Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria Headquarters. <https://radionigeria.gov.ng/2023/10/27/waste-management-and-climate-change/>.
³(Ochogwu, J., Orakwue, C. A. & Ebiede, T. M. (2025). Formalizing the Informal Waste Picker Economy for Sustainable Development in Nigeria. INCLUDE Platform. <https://includeplatform.net/publications/formalizing-the-informal-waste-picker-economy-for-sustainable-development-in-nigeria/>)

This policy paper examines Abuja's waste management system as a case study of Nigeria's urban waste economy. Integrating informal waste workers is essential for effective waste recovery and a circular economy.

Abuja's Municipal Waste Management System

Waste management in Abuja is formally overseen by the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB). Area Councils handle services beyond the city's core. Federal agencies such as NESREA provide regulatory oversight.

The system is mainly landfill-oriented, with minimal source separation, limited recycling infrastructure, and insufficient collection capacity.

Key structural weaknesses include:



Overstretched collection fleets and frequent service disruptions.



Poorly controlled dumpsites and open dumping.



Limited processing and aggregation facilities.



Fragmented governance and weak coordination among agencies.



Absence of city-specific by-laws integrating informal actors.

As a result, large amounts of waste remain unmanaged, and informal recovery drives almost all recycling.

Informal Waste Workers as the Backbone of Nigeria's Recycling Economy

Across Abuja, informal waste workers operate through highly organised yet unrecognised value chains:

- Door-to-door collectors and itinerant buyers
- Street pickers and dumpsite scavengers
- Small aggregators and middlemen
- Links to large recycling companies and exporters.



These actors recover plastics, metals, cartons, paper, rubber, and other valuable materials. Without their work, these materials end up

Private recyclers and social enterprises consistently report that informal workers supply the majority of recyclable materials, accounting for 60-80 per cent of total recovery volumes. Without informal collection networks, recycling operations would collapse.^{3,4}

Where cooperatives or semi-formal arrangements exist, incomes rise, safety improves, and material recovery increases.⁵ These results show the productivity gains of inclusion.

THE HUMAN COST OF EXCLUSION

Despite their contribution, informal waste workers operate in extreme precarity.



Health and Safety Risks

Workers face constant exposure to:

- Sharp objects, medical waste, and toxic materials
- Smoke from burning plastics and e-waste
- Polluted air and water around dumpsites
- Chronic injuries and untreated infections.

Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is minimal. Healthcare is largely self-funded. Risk is normalised as a survival necessity.⁶



Criminalisation and Stigma

Across all study locations, workers report:

- Arbitrary arrests and extortion.
- Evictions from sorting and storage spaces.
- Accusations of theft and vandalism.
- Collective punishment during "cleanup" drives.

Social stigma deepens exclusion, strips dignity, and weakens bargaining power.

³(November 13, 2023). The Informal Economy's Hidden Role in Green Industrialisation. African Centre for Green Economy. <https://africancentre.org/the-informal-economy-s-hidden-role-in-green-industrialisation/>

⁴Abu, R. D., Abu, G. O., Agbebaku, H. U., Jimoh, R. & Bizi, H. L. (2025). CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF WASTE PICKERS' ENGAGEMENT IN INFORMAL WASTE RECOVERY AND RECYCLING SECTORS IN LAGOS MAINLAND, NIGERIA. African Journal of Geographical Sciences 6(2). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8080195>

⁶(October 8, 2025). Private sector provides 70% of Nigeria's healthcare needs – Report. The International Centre for Investigative Reporting. <https://www.icirnigeria.org/private-sector-provides-70-of-nigerias-healthcare-report/>



Economic Vulnerability

Income is volatile and controlled by aggregators and global commodity prices. Most workers are price takers with little access to storage, processing equipment, or direct buyer relationships.⁷

Stakeholder Convergence: Inclusion Is the Only Viable Path.

The strength of this study is that all sectors agree on the core issue.



Government Institutions

Agencies acknowledge:

- Formal systems cannot meet collection demand.
- Informal workers fill critical service gaps.
- Data systems exclude informal contributions.
- Enforcement-heavy approaches undermine outcomes.



Private Sector Actors

Recyclers and social enterprises consistently describe informal workers as the backbone of the recycling industry. They emphasise that:

- Recognition must precede formalisation.
- Private initiatives cannot replace legal protection.
- Stable, organised supply chains improve efficiency.
- Leverage EPR schemes to fund inclusion and welfare.



Informal Waste Workers

- Legal recognition and means of identification (IDs).
- Protection from harassment.
- Designated workspaces.
- Health support, social protection, and personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Inclusion in planning and service delivery.

All groups agree: exclusion weakens the system; inclusion strengthens it.

Why Inclusive Waste Governance Works

Inclusive waste governance means that formal systems recognise, protect, and work with informal waste workers rather than criminalising or displacing them.

Proven Benefits

- Expanded collection coverage.
- Higher recycling rates.
- Reduced waste leakage.
- Lower public service costs.
- Improved workers' welfare.
- Stronger circular economy value retention.



Governments do not need to replace informal systems with expensive, socially destabilising approaches. Instead, they can use existing networks, knowledge, and labour.

Leveraging Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for Inclusion

Nigeria's EPR framework is a major opportunity to finance inclusive waste systems. However, the current implementation risks benefiting only large recyclers and bypassing grassroots collection networks.

Inclusive EPR should:

- Fund last-mile collection and aggregation.
- Support PPE, healthcare, and training.
- Invest in community sorting hubs.
- Capture informal labour data.
- Strengthen cooperatives and associations.



If Extended Producer Responsibility excludes grassroots workers, it will deepen inequality and inefficiency.

1. Formal Recognition and Legal Protection

- a. Federal and sub-national governments should grant legal status to informal waste workers as environmental service providers to ensure their inclusion in official waste systems. It is important to avoid overregulating the established network of informal waste workers, as they play a crucial role in last-mile waste collection.
- b. Establish comprehensive workers registration systems with disaggregated data, and issue

The Journey Ahead: Key Policy Recommendations

verified ID cards and uniforms with barcodes in collaboration with workers' associations by the end of 2026.

- c. End harassment through formal agreements with security agencies and ensure workers' employment is officially recognised.

2. Inclusive Service Delivery Models

- a. Formally include organised informal workers' groups in last-mile waste collection systems within twelve (12) months.
- b. Pilot contracts with workers' cooperatives to ensure fair wages and establish clear performance expectations.

3. Health, Safety, and Social Protection

- a. Immediately provide protective gear, safety training, and access to basic healthcare services for all waste workers.
- b. In consultation with the waste workers', allocate designated workspaces and provide sheds from exposure to tropical weather conditions for waste sorting and aggregation, which are predominantly performed by women.
- c. Implement gender-sensitive initiatives for women with children, such as the provision of daycare centres for infants and young children, and changing rooms for infants.
- d. Immediately provide access to clean water, reliable and gender-friendly sanitation facilities, and promote basic hygiene practices among waste workers.
- e. Link waste management with social welfare and educational programs, especially for migrant families and children.

4. Fair Value Chain and Market Reforms

- a. Ensure transparent pricing structures and strengthen waste workers cooperatives to enhance their market bargaining power by 2027.
- b. Invest in local recycling and aggregation infrastructure to stabilise incomes and reduce reliance on global market prices.

5. Leverage Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for Inclusion

- a. Require Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks to specifically fund grassroots-level collection and logistics operations, as well as workers' welfare, rather than directing support primarily to large recyclers.
- b. Improve enforcement and transparency by capturing data on informal workers' contributions across all urban areas.

Conclusion

In this context, the transition to a circular economy is not only an environmental objective but a social and economic necessity. Nigeria's waste system relies heavily on informal waste pickers who function as the de facto last-mile collection and recycling network, recovering materials that would otherwise accumulate in streets, drains, and dumpsites. Without their daily interventions, plastic and other waste would increasingly clog drainage systems, exacerbate urban flooding, contaminate soil and groundwater, and raise public health and municipal management costs.

Beyond their environmental role, waste pickers are critical to Nigeria's urban economy, providing low-barrier livelihoods that supply domestic recycling markets with secondary raw materials. This function might especially be important for people displaced by conflict or economic disruption, for whom waste picking offers accessible entry into city economies and an essential source of income in the absence of formal employment opportunities.

Recognising, protecting, and partnering with informal waste workers is not charity. It is the most practical, cost-effective, and just pathway to a functional circular economy in Nigeria.



Final Policy Imperative - Nigeria should formally integrate informal waste workers into waste governance frameworks as recognised environmental service providers, unlocking immediate gains in sanitation, recycling, employment, and circular economy performance.

For the full list of sources and supplementary data, visit our website to get the full report by scanning the QR code below.

