

International Waste Pickers Day: honoring lives lost and fighting for dignity, safety and a just transition

March 1, 2026: On March 1 1992, 11 waste pickers were murdered in Barranquilla, Colombia while trying to perform their work. They had been lured into the building by university guards under the pretense of collecting recyclable materials. Once inside, they were attacked, murdered and their bodies sold for research and organ trafficking. In memory of their lives, and in response to the dangerous working conditions, systemic neglect and hostility that waste pickers continue to face around the world, March 1 was declared the International Waste Pickers Day.

On this day, we also commemorate the many waste pickers who lost their lives on the job over the past year, due to dumpsite landslides, traffic accidents, fires, assault, illness, displacement-induced mortality and other injustices. This day is both a commemoration and a call to action. We honor those who have lost their lives and we reaffirm our commitment to securing dignity, justice, protection and recognition for waste pickers everywhere.

The ongoing struggles of waste pickers around the world

Despite our essential environmental and economic contributions, waste pickers continue to face profound challenges across regions.

Across **Africa** and the **Asia-Pacific**, a growing number of our affiliates are facing dumpsite closures without any framework for a just transition. In many cases, these closures abruptly strip waste pickers of their livelihoods, pushing them deeper into poverty with no viable or dignified alternatives. This already critical situation is compounded by the near-total absence of social protection for the women and men who not only struggle each day to sustain their families, but who also provide essential environmental services—recovering recyclable materials, reducing contamination, and extending the life cycle of resources.

In Indonesia IAWP affiliate IPI-PPIM has publicly challenged government decisions to close hundreds of dumpsites without negotiation, urging authorities to recognize their roles and collaborate on inclusive waste management plans. They advocate for recognition as formal workers with rights and fair remuneration, and engagement in government waste systems as



partners and collaborative policy planning. The IAWP and allied organizations publicly stood in solidarity with Indonesian waste pickers, visiting major dumpsites like Bantar Gebang, documenting impacts of dumpsite closures and urging governments to include waste pickers in policy dialogue. This action created pressure on policymakers to rethink top-down closure plans without adequate livelihood safeguards.

In **Latin America and the Caribbean**, many affiliates face growing competition and receding public investment in waste management services. As privatization expands and municipal budgets tighten, waste pickers face increasing pressure from private companies and reduced access to materials, infrastructure and fair compensation. By strengthening their capacities and organizational base, our affiliates have managed to position and give representation to the work of waste pickers. They are now recognized within the waste management chain as service providers and key players in the circular economy. Between 2021 and 2024, 550,000 tons of recyclable materials have been recovered by waste pickers in just 14 Latin American countries, 23% of which is plastic waste, reducing environmental pressure and strengthening sustainable value chains, according to data from Latitud R. Inclusive recycling has undergone a transformation in Latin America, positioning waste pickers as strategic allies capable of implementing investment programs and projects, ensuring that benefits reach directly those who get their hands dirty in the trash.

In **North America**, waste pickers working within and alongside Deposit Return Systems continue to struggle to secure decent work in both the informal and formal aspects of these systems. Many face stigma, unstable and low income and social exclusion. Waste pickers in the region are working to strengthen their [collective communication](#) strategies to defend and advocate for the dignity and impact of the occupation. They are also advancing research to highlight necessary reforms to Deposit Return Systems and other forms of Extended Producer Responsibility to ensure that these systems promote decent and inclusive livelihoods.

In **Europe**, where waste pickers have for centuries recovered second hand goods and scrap for resale and recycling, our affiliates continue to struggle for recognition and support from the region's expanding Circular Economy policies. Despite their long standing role in reuse, waste reduction and recycling, they often remain invisible in policy frameworks. By strengthening communications and research about their work, waste pickers across Europe are growing their visibility and recognition.



This year, we developed two forthcoming studies that document the challenges faced by waste pickers of second hand goods across the region. We have also strengthened affiliates' communications capacity to better advocate for recognition, rights and inclusion.

Facing the future: demanding a just transition in a changing landscape

As waste pickers, we face growing uncertainty over the future of our livelihoods, as automation and artificial intelligence displace human workers and create new barriers, as formalization efforts sideline us rather than recognize our right to a just transition, and as economic inequality and austerity rise around the world. As stigmatized workers in the informal economy, we are the first to suffer the effects of these damaging trends. For this reason, we insist that a transparent and just transition be incorporated into economic policy and ensured within the circular economy.

The International Alliance of Waste Pickers is dedicated to protecting and improving the work of waste pickers across the globe. We call on policy-makers to embed binding safeguards for waste pickers within environmental, climate and circular economy policies; to guarantee effective participation of waste pickers in decision making policies; and to ensure that no transition is carried out at the expense of those who have long sustained recycling systems through their labour.

About the International Alliance of Waste Pickers

The International Alliance of Waste Pickers is a union of waste picker organizations representing more than 465,000 workers across 37 countries. See: <https://globalrec.org>

Our members participate in the collection, separation, sorting, transport, and sale of recyclable and reusable materials and products (paper, plastic, metal, glass and other materials) in an informal or semi-formal capacity, as own account workers or in cooperative settings.

The Alliance defends their work and its recognition, in pursuit of public policies that improve the working and living conditions of the waste pickers of the world.

