

Unilever Human Rights Case Study

Collaborating to improve working conditions for waste pickers

September 2024

Packaging plays an important role in bringing Unilever brands into the hands of our consumers around the world. [An estimated 60% of all plastic that is recycled globally is collected by waste pickers](#) working on an informal basis. Waste pickers can be exposed to hazardous working conditions, inadequate income and exclusion from decision-making processes affecting them and their work.

In 2022, Unilever co-founded the [Fair Circularity Initiative](#) (FCI) with [The Coca-Cola Company](#), [Nestle](#), [PepsiCo](#) and [Tearfund](#). The FCI is driving initiatives that aim to improve working conditions for waste pickers by engaging partners throughout the recycling value chain to promote the integration of the informal waste sector into formal value chains. Along with this, the FCI seeks to engage with waste picker industry organisations to better understand the needs of waste pickers and the challenges they face in their localities so that initiatives can be adapted accordingly.

Members of the FCI support the [Fair Circularity Principles](#) which set out our commitments to recognise and respect waste pickers. All members agree to advance and adopt the Fair Circularity Principles and to report annually on progress.

Unilever has been working on several projects across key markets that bring the Fair Circularity Principles to life, including:

- India: In 2022 we launched the [‘Utthaan Initiative’](#) in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, supporting local waste pickers or ‘Safai Saathis’ (which means ‘invisible environmentalists’) to improve their understanding of their rights and improving their access to social protection schemes including healthcare, financial inclusion, social security and children’s education. At the end of the pilot phase of this project, more than 5,700 Safai Saathis had been reached. The next phase aims to build on this progress.
- Indonesia: In 2023, in collaboration with the [FCDO’s Work and Opportunities for Women \(WOW\) Programme](#) - the UK Government’s flagship women’s economic empowerment programme - we carried out a study to get a better understanding of conditions for women workers and informal waste pickers in the recycling supply chain. This work gathered insight into the needs and priorities of workers in the informal waste sector and provided recommendations for interventions to address key challenges faced by individuals and the wider waste picker community.

We also collaborated on a number of grant-funded projects through TRANSFORM, a unique joint initiative between Unilever, the FCDO and EY, including:

- [WITHOUT by Ashaya](#), an impact-first start-up that upcycles metalised multi-layer packaging into premium products such as sunglasses whilst empowering waste pickers out of poverty in India. The company buys waste directly from waste pickers, providing them with additional income. Waste pickers are incorporated into the supply chain, giving them formalised employment. Ten percent of all sales fund scholarships for children of waste pickers.
- [Taka Taka Solutions](#), a partnership bringing together waste pickers, factories and material recovery facilities in Kenya. The initiative provides employment opportunities to over 700 people at two sorting sites, one composting site, two recycling plants and five buyback centres. More than half of waste pickers are women, who are provided with personal protective equipment, medical checks and childcare support through this project.
- [Conceptos Plasticos](#) in Colombia, supporting women heads of households and young waste collectors in communities that face challenges due to their position of vulnerability. This project aims to promote the importance of recycling, dignify the work of recyclers through good labour practices and empower communities through education and new technologies.

In addition to these projects, we have completed baseline human rights risk assessments in India, Indonesia, Ghana and Brazil which involved on the ground engagement with a range of stakeholders. These, along with our existing programmes on the ground globally, informed the development of our Global Human Rights Framework for Plastics Value Chains. We then opened this framework to [The Circulate Initiative](#) to support the development of their [Harmonized Responsible Sourcing Framework](#), driving a collaborative and aligned industry-wide approach which reduces duplication and maximises collective efforts on transforming the sector. We also shared key learnings from our own work to support the wider peer group during the development of the common industry framework.

As part of the [Business Coalition for a Global Plastics Treaty](#), we are also calling for provisions in the UN plastics treaty to protect and respect the livelihoods and human rights of all people involved in the plastics value chain - for example, through the explicit recognition of and engagement with workers in informal and cooperative settings.

This case study includes information relating to the following UN Guiding Principles Reporting Framework questions:

A1.1 | A1.2 | A1.3 | C2.2 | C2.3 | C4.2 | C4.3 |