



NEEDS ASSESSMENT FOR INFORMAL WASTE PICKERS.

**A Case Study for Kiteezi Landfill in
Kampala.**

TABLE OF CONETENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

CHAPTER 1

- 1.1. Background
 - 1.2. Main goal of the assessment.
 - 1.3. Specific objectives
 - 1.4. Methodology
-

CHAPTER 2

- 2.1. Current situation analysis: what is known.
 - 2.1.1. Operational dynamics of waste pickers around Kiteezi.
 - 2.1.2. Challenges waste pickers face.
 - 2.1.3. Institutional frameworks within which waste pickers operate
 - 2.1.4. Disasters and hazards waste pickers are exposed to.
-

CHAPTER 3

- 3.1. Needs assessment findings
 - 3.1.1. Waste segregation practices by waste pickers.
 - 3.1.2. Health and Well-Being 10
 - 3.1.3. Economic Opportunities and Informal Employment
 - 3.1.4. Security concerns
 - 3.1.4. Community Dynamics (Social)
-

CHAPTER 4

- 4.1.1. Recommendations
-

CONCLUSION

REFERENCES





Kampala, Uganda's capital, generates about 80 tons of plastic waste daily. However, only 40–50% of this waste is formally collected and transported to Kiteezi landfill. The remainder is largely managed by informal waste pickers, highlighting their vital role in urban waste management. Despite this contribution, these waste pickers operate under precarious conditions that undermine their health, safety, and livelihoods.

This Needs Assessment for Informal Waste Pickers was conducted to examine their working conditions and identify opportunities for their integration into formal waste management systems. The specific objectives were: (1) to identify key opportunities to strengthen the operations of informal waste pickers, (2) to assess the major challenges they face, and (3) to co-develop practical solutions with them.

A qualitative research approach was applied, using focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Sixty waste pickers participated in discussions on their daily work, challenges encountered, exposure to occupational and environmental hazards, coping strategies, and capacity needs. Ten key informants including local leaders, health workers, and representatives from civil society organizations provided supplementary insights to validate findings.

The assessment identified critical gaps in five areas: lack of institutional recognition, persistent health and safety risks, high vulnerability to environmental hazards, limited technical capacity in waste handling, and weak organizational dynamics within waste picker communities.

Addressing these gaps requires a multidimensional response involving capacity building, occupational health and safety interventions, technical training, and structured institutional engagement. The findings of this report provide an evidence base for designing interventions that will support the integration of informal waste pickers into Kampala's waste management system, thereby advancing environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

Acknowledgement

This research would not have been possible without the valuable contributions of many individuals and organizations. First and foremost, we extend our deepest gratitude to the waste pickers community at Kiteezi landfill and other stakeholders who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights, offering a firsthand understanding of their daily challenges and resilience. Their stories were central to shaping the findings of this needs assessment.

We would also like to thank the local waste management authorities, especially the Kampala Capital City Authority office at Kiteezi landfill, who gave us permission to access the landfill and interact with Waste Pickers to enable data collection activities. We also extend our sincere appreciation to the TakaNijira Foundation, Uganda, and End Plastic Pollution and African Circular Economy Network for their great inputs in the process of compiling this report. We greatly appreciate Mrs. Betty Osei Bonsu Adjei and Mr. Jacob Johnson Attakpah of GAYO, and Mr. Piotr Barczak (Africa Circular) for their time and effort in reviewing this report.

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Youth volunteers supporting waste pickers at Kiteezi landfill during a clean-up exercise, highlighting the collaborative role of communities in improving waste management practices

Chapter 1

1.1. Background

The International Alliance of Waste Pickers (IAWP) defines a waste picker as a person who engages in picking, collecting, sorting, and making recyclables available for recycling or professional consumption. Waste pickers collect waste daily from households, commercial centers along streets, waterways, dumps or landfills. The current knowledge gap in waste pickers' operations is significant, hindering effective integration and support for this critical sector (Kinobe, 2015). Despite their essential role in waste management, particularly in developing countries, waste pickers' activities, networks, and livelihoods remain poorly understood and largely informal, hence the term informal waste pickers. Informal waste pickers make up the most vulnerable and exploited stakeholders within the plastics value chains. Workers in the informal economy are most at risk of displacement from circular economy policies and therefore deserve prioritization.

Key knowledge gaps exist in areas including:

- ✔ Quantifying the scope and economic impact of informal waste picking,
- ✔ Mapping waste picker networks, routes, and collection patterns,
- ✔ Understanding occupational health and safety risks,
- ✔ Identifying social and economic determinants of waste picker vulnerability and documenting best practices in waste picker organization and advocacy (Mohee & Simelane, 2015).

The 2022 GAYO Uganda baseline survey reveals that informal waste pickers, who work alongside KCCA-contracted collectors, dominate the waste value chain in Kampala. These individuals are crucial as they often access and collect waste from the most challenging areas, playing a vital role in the city's waste management system.

Despite their indispensable service, informal waste pickers face multiple challenges, including health risks, social stigmatisation, and economic instability. Insights from the 2023 Zero Waste Kampala Stakeholders' meeting highlighted that while these workers make significant contributions to waste management, they lack formal recognition and support, which limits their potential impact on achieving zero waste goals.

To address these issues, GAYO Uganda conducted a comprehensive needs assessment of informal waste pickers to better understand their challenges and explore opportunities for formal integration into the national waste management framework.

The existing government policies and interventions to manage waste, including the new national strategy for management of plastic pollution and national sector strategy for organic waste management, have been developed without properly acknowledging the important role and contribution of waste pickers.

Therefore, this assessment aims to develop strategies that enhance the operation of informal waste pickers and improve their livelihood, as well as inform the development of relevant regulations to support informal waste pickers.

1.2. Main goal of the assessment.

The main goal of the assessment was to lay a solid foundation for understanding and improving the informal waste pickers' landscape in Uganda.

1.3. Specific objectives

1. To identify key opportunities that can be leveraged to improve the operations of informal waste pickers in the community.
2. To scope out critical challenges informal waste pickers encounter during their work and co-create solutions with them.
3. To develop a waste pickers assessment report to inform the next stage of the project of waste pickers integration.

1.4. Methodology

A focus group discussion with waste pickers who work at Kiteezi landfill was conducted. In this focus Group Discussion, a total of 60 waste pickers were mobilized and interviewed using a questionnaire. Some degree of interaction was also allowed to collect the diversity of responses from various perspectives. The waste pickers were diverse, including aggregators, coordinators and leaders who provided insightful information about their mode of operation. The Focus group discussions were supplemented with 10 key informant interviews with stakeholders, including Kampala Capital City Authority, medical practitioners around Kiteezi Landfill, waste collection companies and local leaders, to collect information about the ways of life of waste workers.



Field data collection exercise with waste pickers at Kiteezi landfill, where enumerators record information to better understand their challenges and livelihoods

A focus group discussion targeting waste pickers who work at Kiteezi landfill was conducted, focusing on their mode of operations. Throughout this focus Group discussion, a questionnaire was used as a tool for collecting and recording data. The assessment also referenced a series of previous baseline studies and consultations, including the Situation of Waste Management in Kampala of 2022 and the Green Advocacy stakeholders dialogue of 2024, from which crucial insights were drawn to shape methodology framing during the study.

The data collected was consolidated to reflect the views of each group that participated in the assessment.



Chapter 2

2.1. Current situation analysis: what is known.

2.1.1. Operational dynamics of waste pickers around Kiteezi.

Kiteezi landfill is an important income source to large numbers of informal waste workers earning 13,600 UGX (3.7 USD) per day (range of 1500–125,000 UGX) as reported by Aryampa et al. (2021). They comprise 90% of the customers of the supporting businesses, the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) within 2 km of the landfill (Aryampa et al., 2021). According to Balcom (2023), Uganda's solid waste management is an ever-changing, multi-stakeholder landscape implemented primarily by an informal picker economy. In cities and large towns, the municipality usually hires street cleaners to sweep the streets and dump the waste in large skips. This implies that the Informal Waste Workers are the primary stakeholders and play a pivotal role in waste management efforts at the landfill. However, currently, there is no protection for them through legislation. They are exposed to injustices making it hard to implement their work and make a livelihood.

2.1.2. Challenges waste pickers face.

Approximately 40% of the solid waste (SW) generated in Kampala city is collected and properly disposed of at the gazetted landfill, according to WaterAid (2011). 70% of the waste collected and transported to Kiteezi landfill is handled by the Kampala city authorities, and the rest is collected by the contracted private waste collectors and informal waste collectors (WaterAid, 2011; Kinobe et al., 2015).

As informal waste collectors play such a pivotal role, they face a wide range of challenges, including health risks, social stigma, climate-related vulnerabilities, and a lack of legal protection are among other factors that hinder their operations (Kiggundu, 2024). This significantly implies the actual need for support of these informal waste pickers to enable them to overcome all the barriers that can potentially hinder their work so that they effectively contribute to solving the waste management problem in Kampala.



2.1.3. Institutional frameworks within which waste pickers operate

Whereas regulations favor formal actors, informal actors predominantly provide waste collection services in underserved neighborhoods. The interplay between formal and informal actors is vibrant but not legally recognized (Muheirwe et al., 2023). This is prudent for effective planning to accommodate their operations of formal and informal actors and their interface to ensure smart cities, to encourage participation and enable actors' collaboration, consequently reducing uncollected waste volumes and illegal waste disposal sites in the informal settlements. At Kiteezi landfill, the informal waste pickers are, however, registered in groups mainly according to their places of origin. This is primarily for purposes of cultural cohesion and togetherness. As much as these groups are recognized by the landfill management, there is no high-level recognition, especially at the institutional level, and this makes their work remain localized.

2.1.4. Disasters and hazards waste pickers are exposed to.

Waste workers at landfills face numerous hazards and disasters that pose significant risks to their health, safety, and livelihoods stemming from the nature of the work environment, the handling of hazardous materials, and the lack of adequate safety measures (Mensah, 2024). Notably, they are exposed to hazards like the collapse of landfills, for example, the recent scenario at Kiteezi landfill, exposure to hazardous materials, disease outbreaks, toxic gas emissions, accidents involving moving trucks, violence and social conflict.



Informal waste pickers during day-to-day operations

Chapter 3

3.1. Needs assessment findings

3.1.1. Waste segregation practices by waste pickers.

At Kiteezi landfill, waste pickers use rudimentary waste collection, including manual sorting of different types of waste. The collected waste is aggregated and delivered to waiting trucks that transport it to various recycling plants around Kampala city. The handling of this waste by waste pickers is, however, characterized by Participants describing various waste collection methods employed at Kiteezi, including manual sorting and recycling efforts by informal waste pickers.

Major gaps identified include inadequate infrastructure for waste segregation, lack of training for waste pickers and lack of personal protective gear.

3.1.2. Health and Well-Being

One of the most immediate social impacts of poor waste management practices is the deterioration of public health. Waste pickers at the landfill experience increased rates of diseases linked to unsanitary conditions, such as vector-borne diseases like malaria and respiratory illnesses due to air pollution from burning waste. The attraction of pests and vermin leads to outbreaks of diseases, thus affecting the overall health and quality of life for residents. Waste pickers reported that their health is at stake because of too much exposure to waste. The health facilities available near the landfill are too expensive for them to afford.

The waste pickers mentioned that they are exposed to illnesses like Infectious diseases, respiratory problems, vector-borne diseases, skin conditions and mental health issues.



3.1.3. Legal frameworks in operations of waste picker groups:

In this assessment, several waste pickers who are operating at the landfill were identified, primarily working within the lineage of ethnic backgrounds. Accordingly, these waste picker groups included Basonga Group, Teeka Sente Wolaba and Buganda Group. They have a well-defined leadership with a hierarchy of positions assigned to different individuals that steer these groups. Their operations are largely hinged on joint money saving to enable them to access credit as and when needed. These are, however, not formally recognised by the government, including Kampala Capital City Authority, since they are not legally registered. It is therefore crucial to further support such existing waste picker frameworks to drive easier integration into the legal frameworks to enable easier recognition.

3.1.4. Security concerns

Waste pickers don't have adequate protection from relevant authorities, especially Kampala Capital City Authority, which is the overall steward of waste management in the city. Their work is not highly recognized by the authority which makes them continue to operate informally. The waste workers highlighted that their work continues to be limited due to restrictions imposed on them. Much as they have tried to form organized groups they are still un-recognized as formal groups.



3.1.3. Economic Opportunities and Informal Employment

On a more positive note, the landfill provides economic opportunities for informal waste pickers who rely on scavenging as a primary source of income. These individuals play a critical role in waste management by recycling materials that would otherwise contribute to landfill mass. However, this form of employment is often precarious and stigmatized, with waste pickers facing social marginalization and a lack of recognition for their contributions. The informal nature of this work means that many waste pickers operate without any legal protections or benefits, leading to ongoing cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

3.1.4. Community Dynamics (Social)

The presence of the landfill can alter community dynamics significantly. While some community members may benefit economically from waste-related activities, others may experience social fragmentation due to negative perceptions associated with living near a landfill. Stigmatization can lead to social exclusion, where residents feel marginalized or viewed as unclean due to their proximity to waste disposal sites. This can hinder community cohesion and collective action towards improving local conditions



Chapter 4

4.1. Recommendations and conclusions

4.1.1. Recommendations

Capacity building for informal waste workers.

Capacity building for informal waste workers is a crucial process with the potential to improve their working conditions, efficiency, and social inclusion. Key areas of capacity building for informal waste workers include training programs to improve their knowledge of waste segregation, recycling techniques, for example, composting to enhance efficiency and safety, including reuse, repair and upcycling.

Support for waste work groups to obtain formal recognition:

Integrating informal waste workers into formal waste management systems would be crucial for effective solid waste management alongside other players, especially private waste collection companies.

An opportunity available is that there are already existing groups of waste workers with structures of leadership and operations. Leveraging this would galvanize the process of formalization since these are already existing and functional. In addition waste pickers integration ensures decent safety and labour standards, integrating aims at building materials management systems and knowledge, creating formal planned recycling systems while strengthening existing systems for collecting and revaluing materials.

Environmental Awareness.

Conversely, the challenges posed by the landfill have also spurred community awareness and activism regarding environmental issues. As residents experience first hand the negative impacts of poor waste management, there is often a growing demand for better practices and policies. This can mobilise a greater community engagement in advocacy efforts aimed at improving waste management systems in the city and promoting sustainable practices. Collaborative initiatives between local organizations and residents can foster a culture of sustainability, encouraging participation in recycling programs and other environmentally friendly practices. These collaborations could be with the private sector, especially waste recycling companies, Non-Governmental Organizations, and Government Agencies, to ensure a more coherent approach while approaching the waste problem.

Health and Safety Awareness:

Informal waste workers at the landfill are exposed to hazardous materials and unsanitary conditions. Health and safety awareness programs are therefore ideal to safeguard against diseases and disasters. This is crucial, especially referencing the recent Capacity-building initiatives that often include training on occupational health and safety, the use of protective gear, and awareness of hygiene practices to minimize health risks.

Formalization support would be in the form of registering as part of cooperatives or obtaining permits, which can grant workers access to social security benefits, healthcare, and better employment conditions.

Advocacy and Policy Support:

Tailored advocacy on policies that support waste workers' integration into recognized stakeholders in the waste value chain would amplify their voices. This can lead to a better representation in policy dialogues and improve their social and legal status within the community and the broader economy.

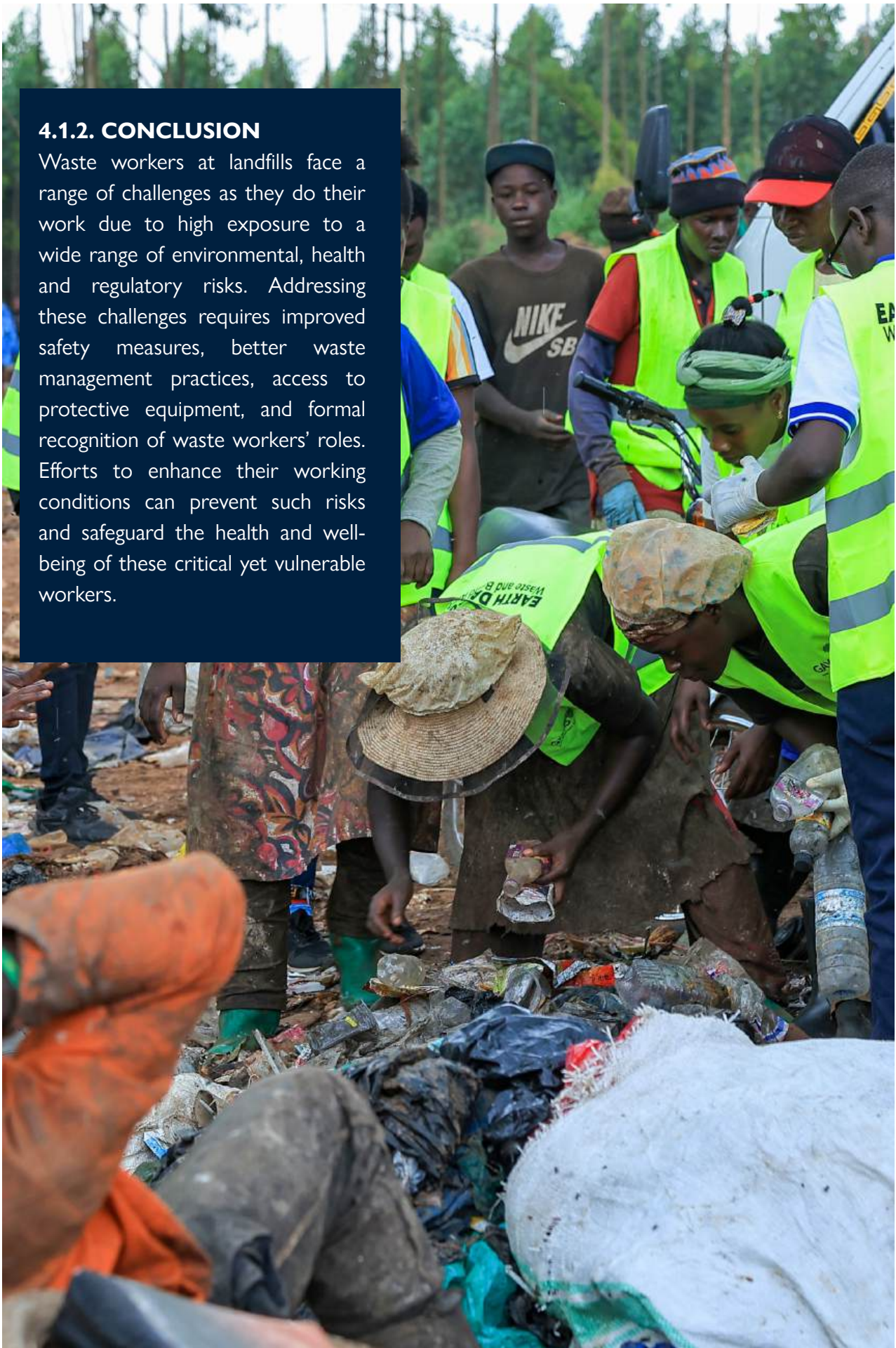
Financial Literacy and Entrepreneurship:

Financial management, savings, and micro-financing knowledge are crucial for waste workers to build a viable business out of waste collection. This is important since it would stabilize and boost their livelihoods as well as increase their capacity in handling volumes of waste and add value which would yield a ripple effect in creating a zero waste city.



4.1.2. CONCLUSION

Waste workers at landfills face a range of challenges as they do their work due to high exposure to a wide range of environmental, health and regulatory risks. Addressing these challenges requires improved safety measures, better waste management practices, access to protective equipment, and formal recognition of waste workers' roles. Efforts to enhance their working conditions can prevent such risks and safeguard the health and well-being of these critical yet vulnerable workers.



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