

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

ABUJA

Nigeria

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



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PREFACE

Nigeria stands at a pivotal moment in its journey toward effective waste management, sustainable urban development, and genuine social inclusion. Rapid urbanization has intensified the complexities of handling waste in a manner that safeguards public health, advances environmental sustainability, and unlocks economic opportunities. Amidst these challenges, one truth emerges unmistakably: informal waste workers, too often overlooked, unrecognized, and excluded from planning form the backbone of Nigeria's recycling systems and urban sanitation.

This research, "Inclusive Waste Governance in Nigeria: Leveraging Informal Waste Workers for a Circular Economy," is grounded in direct engagement with the lived experiences of waste pickers, regulatory agencies, private recyclers, and community associations in Abuja. It explores not just the operational systems of waste collection and recycling, but also the social, economic, and institutional barriers that shape the realities and prospects of the sector's most marginalized actors.

Drawing on extensive fieldwork, including key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory documentation, the study offers a nuanced analysis of Nigeria's waste economy as a complex hybrid of formal and informal systems. Through this lens, it highlights the indispensable contributions of informal workers, the persistent gaps in their recognition and protection, and the opportunities for building more inclusive, just, and sustainable urban governance.

Our findings reaffirm that advancing a circular economy requires more than technological solutions or policy reforms. Progress depends on honest recognition of the value of informal labour, genuine cross-sector partnerships, and concrete steps toward recognition, protection, and empowerment. This report is designed as a resource for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and advocates committed to building waste systems that are efficient, resilient, and above all, fair and dignified for all contributors.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the waste workers who shared their stories, to the organizations and associations that welcomed us, notably the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), Chanja Datti, Eco-Barter, National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), Recyclers Association of Nigeria (RAN), Trash Monger and the Waste Association Pickers of Nigeria (WAPAN) and to the communities whose experiences inspired this work. We hope the insights and recommendations within this report will drive not only better policy, but also a more inclusive vision for urban development in Nigeria and beyond.

ACRONYMS

AMAC	Abuja Municipal Area Council
AEPB	Abuja Environmental Protection Board
FCT	Federal Capital Territory
NESREA	National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency
RAN	Recyclers Association of Nigeria
WAPAN	Waste Association Pickers of Nigeria
MSW	Municipal Solid Waste
SWM	Solid Waste Management
STDD	Satellite Town Development Department
EPR	Extended Producer Responsibility
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
KII	Key Informant Interview
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
FCC	Federal Capital City
PET	Polyethylene Terephthalate (plastic)
LDPE	Low-Density Polyethylene
HDPE	High-Density Polyethylene
PRO	Producer Responsibility Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNCRD	United Nations Centre for Regional Development
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)

Executive Summary

Nigeria's urban waste system is a hybrid formal–informal economy, with informal workers handling most last-mile collection, sorting, and recyclable recovery. Formal services remain overstretched, while recycling markets rely on informal labour. Yet informal workers are largely unrecognised, criminalised, and excluded from formal planning and investment.

This study uses key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and interviews with government, private-sector, recyclers, and worker associations to examine how the system operates and what makes it effective, inclusive, and sustainable.

Findings show consensus among stakeholders on the indispensable role of informal waste workers in urban sanitation and the recycling chain. Informal actors reach waste streams that formal systems cannot, supplying most recyclables and filling key service gaps. However, they face unsafe conditions, income instability, social stigma, gendered vulnerabilities, and harassment by security agencies.

Government agencies note weak infrastructure, poor data, and divided mandates, while private actors admit reliance on informal labour. Both recognise that enforcement or exclusion undermines environmental goals and livelihoods. Evidence from focus groups shows strong worker identity, informal self-regulation, political awareness, and demand for recognition.

The study concludes that the central challenge is not whether to include informal waste actors, but how to institutionalise their role in a fair, coordinated, and protective manner. Inclusive waste governance built on recognition, protection, and partnership offers the most effective pathway to improved waste collection efficiency, higher recycling rates, safer working conditions, and more resilient circular-economy outcomes.

Key policy recommendations for actions include:

1. Formal Recognition and Protection

- a. Recognise informal waste workers as environmental service providers.
- b. Introduce registration, IDs, and designated workspaces.
- c. End harassment through clear protocols with security agencies.

2. Inclusive Service Delivery

- a. Integrate organised informal groups into community-based and last-mile collection systems.
- b. Pilot service contracts with cooperatives and associations.

3. Health, Safety, and Social Protection

- a) Provide PPE, safety training, and access to basic healthcare.
- b) Apply gender-responsive safeguards for women in waste work.

4. Fair Value Chain Reforms

- a. Promote transparent pricing and strengthen cooperatives to improve bargaining power.
- b. Invest in local aggregation and processing infrastructure.

5. Leverage EPR for Inclusion

- a. Ensure EPR frameworks fund collection, logistics, and worker welfare, not only for large recyclers.
- b. Improve enforcement, transparency, and geographic coverage.

6. Coordination and Data

- a. Strengthen coordination among AEPB, AMAC, STDD, NESREA, private actors, and worker associations.
- b. Capture informal waste flows and labour contributions in official data systems.

Nigeria's waste system already depends on informal labour, and the transition to a functional circular economy will not succeed without it. The study shows that inclusive waste governance is a practical necessity, not merely a social add-on. Leveraging the knowledge, scale, and resilience of informal workers is essential for cleaner cities, decent livelihoods, and sustainable outcomes. Recognising, protecting, and partnering with these workers enables higher recycling rates and value retention within local economies. Such governance allows materials to circulate longer, reduces waste leakage, fosters dignified livelihoods, and grounds the circular economy in social justice and environmental efficiency.

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Voices from the Dumpsites

• • Testimonies from Informal Waste Pickers Across Abuja • •

“People think we are criminals, but we are only picking what has been thrown away. We are not thieves.”

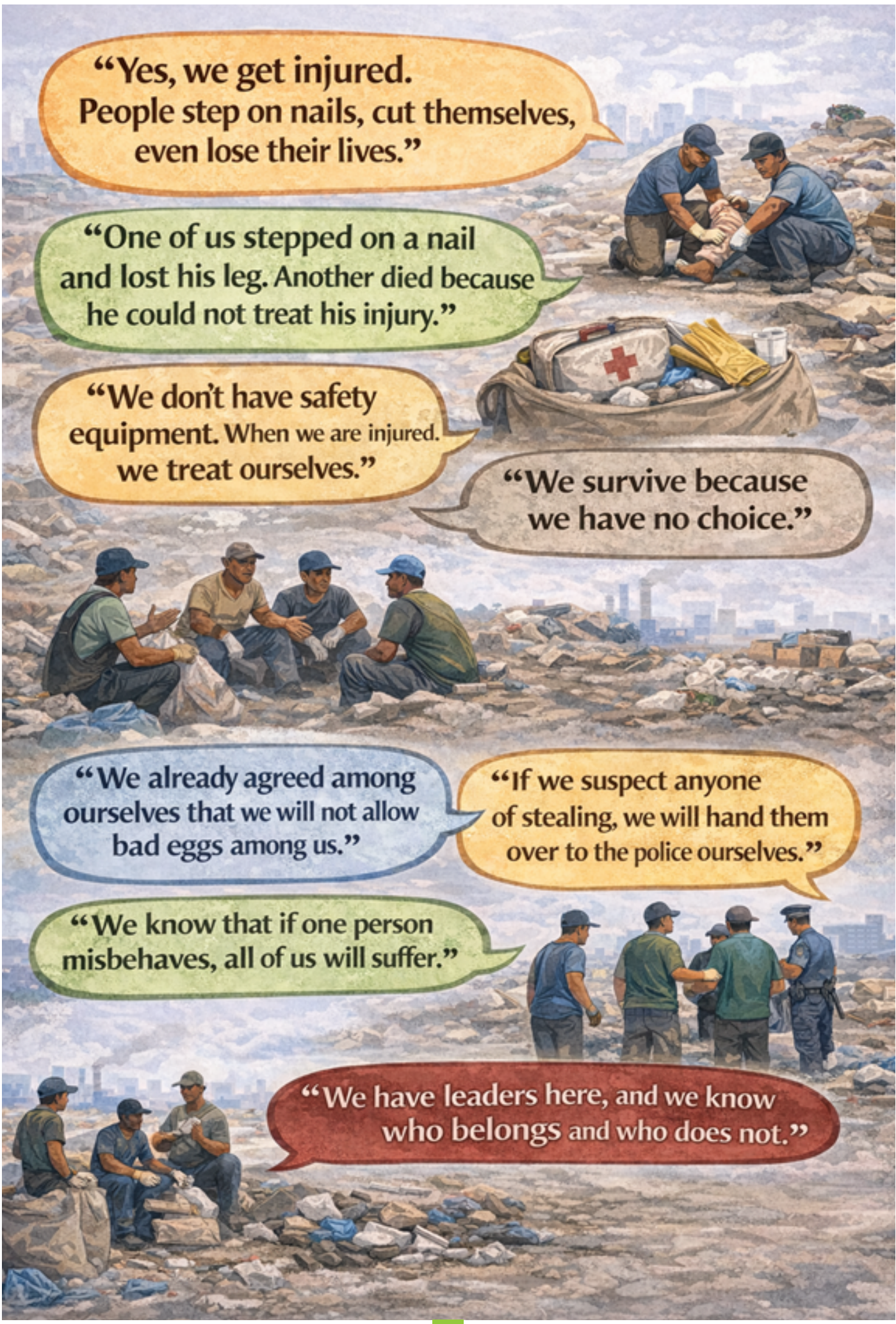
“They look at us like we are useless, but this work is how we feed our families and keep the city clean.”

“We are doing dirty work, but it is honest work.”

“When something is stolen somewhere else, they come and arrest all of us here.”

“They don’t investigate. They just see waste pickers and assume we are guilty.”

“We have suffered arrests, beatings, and harassment for crimes we did not commit.”



“Yes, we get injured. People step on nails, cut themselves, even lose their lives.”

“One of us stepped on a nail and lost his leg. Another died because he could not treat his injury.”

“We don’t have safety equipment. When we are injured, we treat ourselves.”

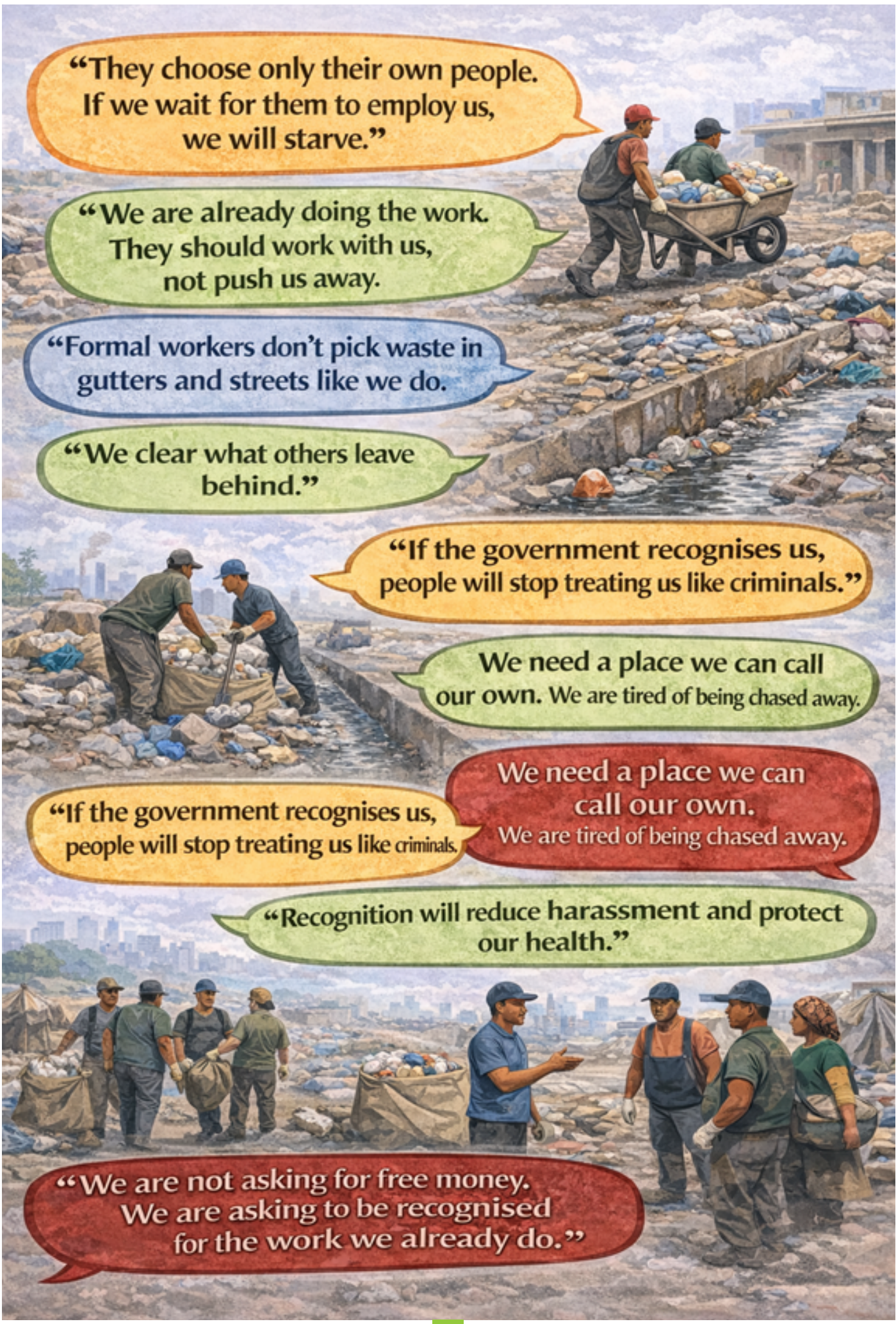
“We survive because we have no choice.”

“We already agreed among ourselves that we will not allow bad eggs among us.”

“If we suspect anyone of stealing, we will hand them over to the police ourselves.”

“We know that if one person misbehaves, all of us will suffer.”

“We have leaders here, and we know who belongs and who does not.”



“They choose only their own people.
If we wait for them to employ us,
we will starve.”

“We are already doing the work.
They should work with us,
not push us away.”

“Formal workers don’t pick waste in
gutters and streets like we do.”

“We clear what others leave
behind.”

“If the government recognises us,
people will stop treating us like criminals.”

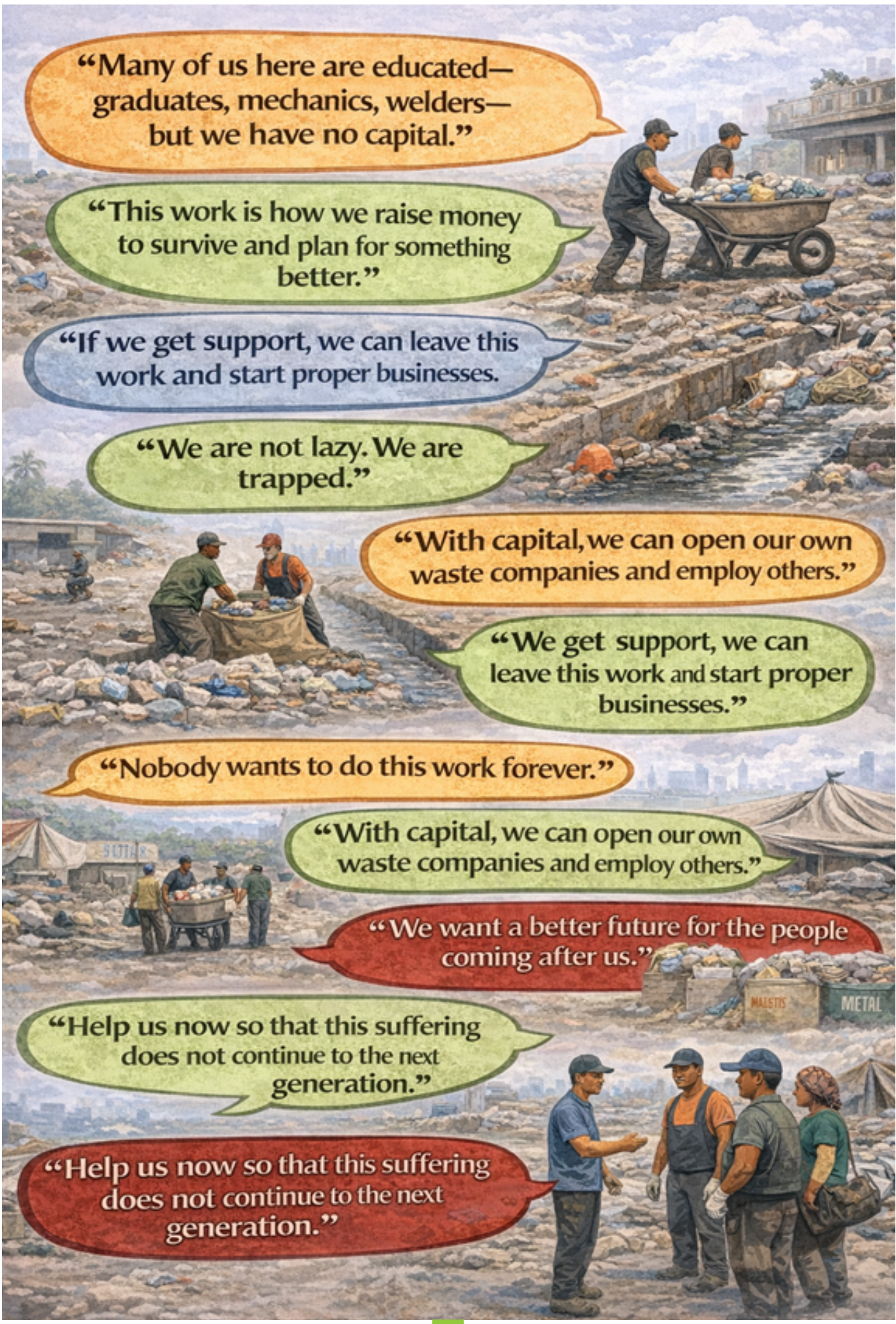
We need a place we can call
our own. We are tired of being chased away.

“If the government recognises us,
people will stop treating us like criminals.”

We need a place we can
call our own.
We are tired of being chased away.

“Recognition will reduce harassment and protect
our health.”

“We are not asking for free money.
We are asking to be recognised
for the work we already do.”



“Many of us here are educated—
graduates, mechanics, welders—
but we have no capital.”

“This work is how we raise money
to survive and plan for something
better.”

“If we get support, we can leave this
work and start proper businesses.

“We are not lazy. We are
trapped.”

“With capital, we can open our own
waste companies and employ others.”

“We get support, we can
leave this work and start proper
businesses.”

“Nobody wants to do this work forever.”

“With capital, we can open our own
waste companies and employ others.”

“We want a better future for the people
coming after us.”

“Help us now so that this suffering
does not continue to the next
generation.”

“Help us now so that this suffering
does not continue to the next
generation.”

Chapter 1 - Introduction: Nigeria’s waste sector and the unsung champions

Nigeria generates tens of millions of tonnes of municipal solid waste (MSW) each year¹, yet average collection efficiency in many cities remains low at about 40 –50 per cent², leaving large volumes unmanaged. The composition of MSW is dominated by organic waste (50– 60 per cent), followed by plastics (10 –15 per cent), paper (5 –10 per cent), metals (around 5 per cent), and other materials such as glass, textiles, and inert waste, making up the remainder.³

Nigeria’s overall recycling rate is generally estimated at under 10 per cent of total solid waste, and plastics recycling is typically reported in the single digits nationally, often below 10 to 12 per cent.⁴

Informal workers handle most of Nigeria’s waste but receive little support and are excluded from circular economy policies, limiting sustainable waste recovery and value creation.



Poor waste management in Nigeria poses serious, interconnected threats to health, the environment, the economy, and social stability.

¹Federal Ministry of Environment & NESREA. (2025). Solid waste management in Nigeria: Legal and institutional framework and gap analysis. Abuja, Nigeria.
²Federal Ministry of Environment & NESREA. (2025). Solid waste management in Nigeria: Legal and institutional framework and gap analysis. Abuja, Nigeria.
³Nnaji, C. C. (2015). Status of municipal solid waste generation and disposal in Nigeria. Nigerian Journal of Technology, 34(3), 493–500.
⁴Nigeria Health Watch. (2025, April 28). Using the waste to wealth model to address Nigeria’s plastic waste problem. Accessed 10.11.2025. <https://sjai.nigeriahealthwatch.com/using-the-waste-to-wealth-model-to-address-nigerias-plastic-waste-problem>



INFORMAL WASTE COLLECTORS:

According to UNEP and Nigerian media, approximately 80 percent of recycling in the country conducted by the informal sector, with informal actors responsible for 80 to 90 per cent of all recyclables recovered nationwide. In contrast, formal systems account for only 4.7 percent of this recovery, underscoring the critical role that informal workers play in addressing the collection and recycling gap.⁵



Despite their significant contributions, informal actors remain largely excluded from formal planning and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)-driven circular economy schemes.

Informal waste workers are central to Nigeria’s waste system and any credible circular economy strategy because they already collect most recyclables and a large share of municipal waste, but their current conditions undermine both social justice and system performance. Addressing their challenges is therefore not charity, it is an efficiency, climate, and equity requirement if Nigeria wants to meet plastic, circular economy, and SDG targets.

There is therefore a need to review the barriers, needs, and challenges of informal waste workers to explore models and practices that strengthen their operations and enable Nigeria to earn more from the circular economy.



⁵Salau, G. (2025, January 3). Public health, environment suffer amid thriving informal recycling system. The Guardian (Nigeria). <https://guardian.ng/features/health/public-health-environment-suffer-amid-thriving-informal-recycling-system/>

Aim and Objectives

This project seeks to understand Abuja's waste management system, document the role of informal waste workers, and advocate for their recognition and integration into the formal waste management sector.

Specifically, the project will spotlight over 83 informal waste workers in Abuja to understand their roles, challenges, aspirations, and basic demographics. It will examine the municipal waste management structure by engaging key regulators and agencies to understand existing systems, recycling practices, and their perspectives on informal waste workers. The project will also engage formal recyclers and

recycler associations to map the recycling value chain, assess the contribution of informal workers, and gather data on actors within the sector.

In addition, the project will explore recycling and the circular economy, including costs, value, best practices, and pricing, and produce a practical guide to inform better policies and investments. Outputs will include a comprehensive report on informal waste management and a photo documentary and exhibition to raise public awareness and support the formalisation of the sub-sector in Abuja.



Methodology

1. Study Design and Approach

The study adopted a mixed-methods, qualitative-dominant research design to generate an in-depth understanding of Abuja's waste management system, with a particular focus on the role, conditions, and contributions of informal waste workers. The approach combined desk-based research, field engagement, stakeholder interviews, and participatory documentation to ensure that both institutional perspectives and lived experiences were captured. Emphasis was placed on inclusion, data triangulation, and policy relevance.

2. Desk Review and Context Analysis

A comprehensive desk review was conducted at the inception stage to establish the policy, institutional, and operational context of waste management in Abuja. This review covered national and FCT waste management policies and regulations, circular economy and recycling frameworks relevant to Nigeria, existing studies on informal waste workers and urban waste systems, and reports from government agencies, development partners, and civil society organisations. Findings from the desk review informed stakeholder mapping, data collection tools, and analytical frameworks.

3. Stakeholder Mapping

The study conducted a structured mapping of actors across the waste management and recycling value chain in Abuja, with a particular focus on the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC). These included informal waste workers operating in markets, streets, dumpsites, and residential areas; municipal waste management authorities and regulators, including NESREA, the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), and the Satellite Town Development Department (STDD); formal recycling companies and recycler associations; as well as scrap dealers and aggregators. The mapping guided sampling, engagement strategies, and analysis of relationships within the sector.

4. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling approach was used to ensure relevance and diversity of perspectives.

Between 75 and 85 informal waste workers were selected across different locations and waste streams

in Abuja Apo Primary (Kabusa), Gwagwalada, Karu-Nyanyan, Karu-Site, Kpegeyi), with attention to gender, age range, and types of activities such as collection, sorting, and trading. Key officials from the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA), the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), and the Satellite Town Development Department (STDD) were selected based on their institutional roles in waste management and recycling. Formal recyclers and recycler associations were identified through purposive and snowball sampling to capture different segments of the recycling value chain.

5. Data Collection Methods

a. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with informal waste workers to understand their daily activities, income sources, working conditions, health and safety risks, challenges, aspirations, and interactions with government agencies and recyclers. Interviews were also held with waste management regulators and municipal officials to examine institutional structures, policies, recycling practices, data availability, and perceptions of informal waste workers. In addition, formal recyclers and recycler associations were interviewed to understand material sourcing, pricing mechanisms, value chain dynamics, challenges, and the contribution of informal waste workers to recycling operations.

b. Field Observation

Direct field observations were conducted at selected dumpsites, markets, streets, and recycling hubs. These observations documented waste types and flows, sorting and recovery practices, use of protective equipment, and environmental and health conditions. Field notes and photographs, with consent, complemented interview data.

c. Participatory Photo Documentation

A participatory documentation approach was employed to visually capture the realities of informal waste workers. Selected participants were featured in photo and short video documentation highlighting their daily routines, contributions to waste recovery, and challenges. This approach strengthened advocacy and public engagement while centering the voices of informal workers.

6. Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and observations were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Key themes included governance and institutional coordination, livelihoods and working conditions, health and safety risks, recycling economics and pricing, and the inclusion of informal workers within circular economy frameworks. Findings from different data sources were triangulated to enhance validity and credibility.

7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards throughout its implementation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, participation

was voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage. Identities were protected when requested, and all photo and video materials were produced and used with explicit consent for documentation and public dissemination.

8. Validation and Reporting

Preliminary findings were validated through feedback from selected stakeholders. The final outputs included a comprehensive analytical report on informal waste management in Abuja, a practical guide to inform waste management and recycling policies, and a photo/video documentary and exhibition aimed at raising public awareness and advocating for the formalisation of the informal waste management sub-sector.





Chapter 2 - Municipal Waste Management Structure in Abuja: Centralized AEPB-led Waste System

Nigeria's waste management system, including in Abuja, depends on underfunded public services and a largely invisible informal sector. Waste pickers play a crucial role in recovering plastics and other recyclables, but they often face precarious working conditions, stigma, and exclusion from policy decisions. To better integrate waste pickers into a circular economy, there is a need for legal recognition, inclusive planning, fair contracts, and business models that connect waste pickers to producer responsibility schemes and plastic value chains.

Waste Management in Abuja, Nigeria

Waste management in Abuja is primarily overseen by the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), which is responsible for street sweeping, waste collection, transportation, and disposal. However, the system is constrained by infrastructure gaps, including ageing trucks, limited recycling facilities, and irregular service delivery. Rapid urbanization and increasing waste generation have further overwhelmed the formal system, leading to open dumping, poorly managed landfills, and significant environmental impacts on nearby communities. Although Abuja operates under national waste management laws, the absence of strong city-specific bylaws has created regulatory and enforcement gaps, leading to weak coordination among agencies, particularly regarding informal waste workers and resource recovery outfits.

In other words, Abuja's municipal waste system is formally structured around the Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB), which plans and regulates services, and a network of few private contractors and area councils that handle day-to-day collection and disposal. In practice, the system is centralized, landfill-oriented, with weak source separation and a large informal layer operating alongside the formal chain.⁶

Core institutions and mandates

- AEPB is the lead agency for solid and liquid waste management, sanitation, pollution control and environmental health within the Federal Capital City (FCC); it prepares strategic Solid Waste Management (SWM) plans and issues guidelines for recycling.⁷
- Area Councils (e.g. Abaji, AMAC, Bwari, Gwagwalada, Kuje and Kwali) are constitutionally recognised as responsible for waste management outside the FCC, but often lack resources and rely on local contractors and community arrangements.⁸
- The Satellite Towns Development Department (STDD), an agency under the FCT Administration, also provides waste management services in specific outlying areas of the Federal Capital Territory. It collaborates with private contractors to provide interventionist waste collection and disposal services.
- The Federal Ministry of Environment sets national policies, laws and standards, while agencies such as NESREA provide regulatory oversight but do not directly provide waste collection or disposal services.⁹

Service delivery and operations

- Within the FCC, AEPB supervises and partly delivers sweeping, primary collection from communal points, healthcare waste collection, and final disposal, while most household and commercial collection is carried out by licensed private operators under contract.¹⁰
- Residents and businesses are required to store waste in approved bins, pay service charges, and present waste on designated collection days; however, non-payment and weak enforcement contribute to irregular collection and illegal dumping.¹¹
- Outside the Federal Capital City, waste collection coverage is inconsistent; many households rely on informal workers, self-haul to dumps,

⁶Abuja Environmental Protection Board (AEPB) - <https://ammcsite.wordpress.com/departments/aepb/>

⁷Kadafa, Adati Ayuba, Latifah. A Review on Municipal Solid Waste Management in Nigeria. *J Am Sci* 2012;8(12):975-982. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>.

⁸Africa Clean Cities (07.2022): Abuja – Nigeria. https://www.africancleancities.org/sites/default/files/2022/07/abuja_en.pdf

⁹NESREA (2025): The Assessment Report Of Gaps And Needs Of Solid Waste Management In Nigeria. https://nesrea.gov.ng/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Full-draft-Report-Solid-Waste-Management-Edited-15102025-Revised_compressed.pdf

¹⁰Abdulrahman M. et al (2024): Household Solid Wastes: Collection and Disposal Methods in Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. *Veterinary Medicine and Public Health Journal (VMPH)* Volume.5, Issue.1, pp: 17-26 Article 3 Jan (2024)

¹¹Queen Ozohu Sadiq, Cyril Kanayochukwu Ezeamaka, Ali Williams Butu. (2019). Municipal Solid Waste Disposal and Its Environmental Implications in Wuse Zone 5, Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, Nigeria. *International Journal of Environmental Protection and Policy*, 6(6), 97-102. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijep.2018606.11>

or dispose of waste in open spaces, drains, and informal dump sites.¹²

- Outside the Federal Capital City, collection coverage is patchy; many households use informal workers, self-haul to dumps, or dispose of in open spaces, drains and informal dump-sites.

Infrastructure and technical system

- Abuja relies on one main engineered but open dumpsite (often referenced as Gosa) and several other historically used disposal areas (Mpape, Ajata, Kubwa, Karshi), with open dumping and bulldozers used to spread and cover waste.
- There is no citywide source-segregation system; waste from households and markets is largely mixed, with minimal formal sorting or material recovery before landfilling, and recycling is mainly driven by informal workers at communal points and the dumpsite, with formal recycling companies providing off-taking and secondary recycling processing services.¹⁴
- The collection fleet is a mix of compactor trucks and open vehicles, but numbers are insufficient and breakdowns are frequent, leading to missed routes, overfilled communal containers and visible piles in many communities.

Governance and regulatory framework

- Abuja's municipal waste management is governed mainly by national environmental laws and FCT-level regulations (e.g., the Waste Management Regulations 2012, draft Guidelines and Policy for SWM in FCT, AMAC's Waste Policy), rather than by a detailed city-specific bylaw; this creates gaps in enforcement and in city-tailored rules.¹⁵
- AEPB's organizational structure includes a Department of Solid Waste Management and Sanitation, responsible for planning, contracts, supervision, billing and enforcement, but staffing and funding are reported as inadequate for the pace of urban growth.¹⁶
- Recent initiatives such as the "Urban Lab" and local adaptation/waste governance projects aim to strengthen inter-agency coordination, clarify roles between AEPB and area councils,

and develop a more robust framework for waste recovery and treatment.¹⁷

Informal Waste Workers: Market Practices and Value Chains

- Informal waste workers, including dumpsite scavengers, street workers, and itinerant buyers, play a critical role in Nigeria's waste system by collecting, sorting, and selling recyclables such as plastics (especially PET), metals, and other valuable materials, thereby diverting large volumes of waste from landfills and protecting the environment.
- Recent estimates suggest that around 100,000 waste pickers nationwide¹⁸ may collectively recover hundreds of thousands of tonnes of plastic each year, providing an essential yet largely unrecognized environmental service. In major cities like Lagos and Abuja, these workers connect households, and dumpsites to small recyclers and large, effectively functioning as the "last-mile" collection system within the recycling value chain.

Collection routes:

- Door-to-door or compound collection (cart pushers, itinerant buyers) in dense neighbourhoods and markets, often paid small fees or allowed to keep recyclables.
- Picking at dumpsites, transfer stations and street bins, where workers extract recyclables from mixed waste delivered by municipal trucks or private contractors.

Trading structure:

- Individual workers sell to small aggregators/middlemen, who then consolidate and bale materials for larger "resource merchants" or recycling companies.
- Prices are highly variable and depend on both international and domestic demand; workers have little price-setting power and often accept whatever daily rate middlemen offer for PET, metals, and other materials.
- In some Private Public Partnerships (PPPs) or company-backed schemes, firms train collectors on which plastics to collect and buy them back at

¹²ibid

¹³Oyeniyi, B.A (2011): Waste Management in Contemporary Nigeria: The Abuja Example. International Journal of Politics and Good Governance Volume 2, No 2.2, Quarter II 2011 ISSN : 0976 – 1195.

¹⁴ibid

¹⁵ibid

¹⁶Abuja Digest (2022): AEPB To Strengthen FCT Healthcare Waste Management System. <https://abujadigest.info/stories/evnroment/aepb-to-strenghten-fct-healthcare-waste-mangement-system/>

¹⁷Covenant of Mayors in Sub-Saharan Africa (22 July 2024): Abuja Urban Lab workshop showcases collaborative progress on future waste management strategies. <https://comssa.org/en/news/abuja-urban-lab-workshop-showcases-collaborative-progress-on-future-waste-management-strategies>

¹⁸CHUKWUKA O.U (2025): Plastic Waste Management in Nigeria: An Eco-Theological Appraisal of Scavengers and Waste Pickers as Marginalized Stewards of Creation. International Journal for the Study of Intercultural Values and Indigenous Ecoethics Volume 6, Number 2, September, 2025, ISSN: 1116-1515

set rates, but coverage is still limited relative to the scale of urban waste.

Labour and organisation:

- The majority of waste workers in the studied Nigerian cities are young men, though women and children are visible in many dumpsites and markets, and communities.
- Where cooperatives or small enterprises have formed, incomes can rise by 50–100 per cent, and working conditions improve, especially when linked to communal sorting centres and direct contracts with buyers.¹⁹

Challenges faced by informal waste collectors under rapid urbanisation

Waste pickers in Nigeria often work without contracts, social protection, or sufficient health and safety measures. This exposes them to hazardous conditions, including toxic smoke, sharp objects, and mixed waste at dumpsites. Beyond physical risks, they also face social stigma, harassment, and periodic eviction or “clearance” efforts, which disrupt livelihoods and reinforce unequal power relations between municipalities, private contractors, and informal workers.

Within the recycling value chain, middlemen, aggregators, and large buyers capture most of the economic value, leaving waste pickers with low remuneration, weak bargaining power, and limited direct access to recycling companies or extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes. More specifically -

Health, safety and environment:

- Workers operate in hazardous conditions, exposed to broken glass, sharps, medical waste, smoke from open burning, and polluted air and water around dumpsites and transfer stations.²⁰
- Lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), sanitation, and health services at work sites leads to high risks of infection, respiratory problems, injuries and long-term toxic exposure, particu-

larly where e-waste is burned, or plastics are openly burned..²¹

Legal and social status:

- Waste pickers face criminalisation, harassment, evictions from landfills and arbitrary arrests, especially when cities try to “modernise” waste management without inclusion, although Abuja is described as relatively more lenient than Lagos.²²
- Strong social stigma and discrimination (perceived as “dirty” or criminals) undermine their bargaining power and limit their participation in planning, despite their essential contributions to urban waste services.²³
- The mobility and informality of their work make it difficult for waste workers to organize, advocate for their rights, or participate in decision-making processes.
- Urbanization may not account for the needs of informal workers, leaving them without access to sorting areas, storage facilities, or recycling centers.

Economic and governance pressures:

- Rising urban populations increase total waste and competition over recyclables, while formal contracts sometimes give exclusive rights to private firms, blocking pickers from high-value waste streams.
- Fragmented policies, lack of unified national guidance on informal sector integration, and inconsistent practices between cities create uncertainty and make it difficult for workers to invest in better equipment or organisation.²⁵
- As competition increases and waste streams are diverted to formal entities, informal workers may experience declining and unpredictable incomes. Middlemen and scrap dealers can exploit their lack of bargaining power.

¹⁹UNCRD (2024): Communal/informal Sector Participation in the Waste Management Industry by Tunde Adewole https://uncrd.un.org/sites/uncrd.un.org/files/20141218_waste-mng-nigeria_p2_recyclepoints.pdf

²⁰Gbenga Salau (4 January 2025) Public health, environment suffer amid thriving informal recycling system. The Guardian Newspaper. <https://guardian.ng/features/health/public-health-environment-suffer-amid-thriving-informal-recycling-system/>

²¹ibid

²²Joseph O, Chikaodili A, Tonye M (2024): Formalizing the Informal Waste Picker Economy for Sustainable Development in Nigeria. A Research Conducted By Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR)-Abuja, Nigeria, Supported by Knowledge Platform on Inclusive Development Policies (INCLUDE) <https://includeplatform.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/FINAL-INCLUDE-REPORT-2024-1.pdf>

²³ibid

²⁴Koroma, A., Scott, R., & Esson, J. (2025). Informal waste pickers in Africa: social reproduction, marginalisation and sustainability. *Local Environment*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2025.2596724>

²⁵TearFund (2023): Country case study in Nigeria Challenges and opportunities in the informal waste sector. A case study written by Tearfund and funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). <https://res.cloudinary.com/tearfund/image/fetch/https://learn.tearfund.org/-/media/learn/resources/case-studies/2023/2023-tearfund-case-study-nigeria-informal-waste-sector-en.pdf>



Chapter 3 - The Situational Analysis: Field Evidence

Analysis of Findings from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

This section presents an analysis of findings from 34 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with informal waste workers, waste management regulators, and formal recyclers in Abuja. The KIIs provided in-depth qualitative insights into how waste is generated, collected, sorted, and recycled, as well as the institutional, economic, and social dynamics shaping the waste management system in the Federal Capital Territory.

The interviews enabled a deeper understanding of the roles and contributions of informal waste workers, their working conditions, challenges, and aspirations, alongside perspectives from government institutions and private-sector actors respon-

sible for regulation, collection, and recycling. By capturing diverse viewpoints across the waste value chain, the KIIs helped to identify key gaps in governance, coordination, data availability, and inclusion within existing waste management and circular economy frameworks.

Findings from the KIIs were thematically analysed and triangulated with field observations and insights from desk reviews. The analysis that follows is organised around key themes emerging from the interviews, including institutional arrangements for municipal waste management, the functioning of the recycling value chain, livelihoods and risks faced by informal waste workers, and opportunities for more inclusive and sustainable waste management in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

1

Thematic analysis of the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with informal waste workers and aggregators operating in Apo Pantaker in Abuja. The analysis synthesizes shared patterns, differences, and key insights across all interviews.

1. Entry Pathways and Livelihood Transitions

Most respondents entered informal waste work due to economic necessity, following declining income in previous trades such as carpentry, tailoring, borehole drilling, farming, or security work. Migration from Kano, Zamfara, Kaduna, Ebonyi, and other states to Abuja was common, driven by high unemployment rates or displacement. Entry into waste work was largely informal and peer-driven, relying on mentorship from friends, relatives, or senior colleagues rather than formal training. Over time, several respondents transitioned from street picking into aggregation and coordination roles, employing or buying from younger waste pickers.

Key insight: Informal waste work serves as a critical livelihood safety net for rural migrants and low-skilled workers excluded from the formal economy.

2. Nature of Work and Waste Value Chains

All respondents are actively involved in collect-

ing, sorting, aggregating, and reselling recyclables. Priority materials include PET bottles, HDPE, LDPE, metals, cartons, paper, rubber, and aluminium, selected based on availability and market demand. Collection routes span residential areas, streets, markets, and dumpsites, often involving long-distance trekking across Abuja.

A clear hierarchy within the informal system emerged:

- Street pickers and itinerant workers
- Small aggregators and buyers
- Larger aggregators linking to recycling companies and exporters

This structure positions informal workers as the last-mile workers feeding Nigeria's recycling industry.

Key insight: Informal waste workers are central to Abuja's recycling value chain, despite operating outside formal urban planning frameworks.

3. Income, Economic Contribution, and Household Dependence

Income levels vary widely from ₦2,500 – ₦3,000 for street waste pickers to ₦6,000 – ₦7,000 on good days for aggregators, with incomes remaining irregular and unpredictable. Several respondents support large households (8–20 dependents) by using waste income to pay school fees, build houses, buy land, or support extended families in rural areas. However, income remains unpredictable, influenced by market prices, access to materials, and government restrictions.

Key insight: Despite low margins and price exploitation by middlemen, informal waste work sustains entire households and contributes to urban and rural economies.

4. Working Conditions, Health, and Safety

Across interviews, occupational health and safety conditions are poor. Most respondents:

- Lack consistent access to gloves, boots, or protective clothing
- Work around areas laden with smoke, sharp objects, and contaminated wastes
- Rely on self-care or peer support when injured

While a few reported occasional PPE distribution by AEPB or NGOs, usage remains low due to scarcity, discomfort, or lack of enforcement.

Key insight: Health risks are normalized and unmanaged, reflecting systemic neglect rather than worker ignorance.

5. Harassment, Stigma, and Insecurity

A dominant theme is criminalization and social stigma. Respondents reported:

- Arrests, harassment, and accusations of theft
- Forced evictions and burning of sorting sites
- Restrictions on collection routes
- Public perception of waste workers as criminals or nuisances

Many acknowledged that unregistered or rogue actors contribute to negative perceptions, but emphasized that organized workers are unfairly punished.

Key insight: Insecurity and harassment stem from governance failures, not the nature of the work itself.

6. Role of Associations and Self-Regulation

Membership in associations such as WAPAN, Bola-Bola Association, Panteka Waste Pickers Association, and Scrap Dealers Associations emerged as a critical protection mechanism. Associations provide:

- Identity cards, uniforms, and registration
- Mediation with the government and security agencies
- Advocacy to lift bans and prevent harassment
- Internal vetting using guarantors and National Identification Number (NIN)

Where associations are strong, workers report greater legitimacy and protection.

Key insight: Informal worker associations already perform key regulatory and accountability functions that government systems lack.

7. Government Engagement and Policy Gaps

Most respondents reported receiving minimal government support, aside from occasional training or the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE). Major policy gaps include:

- Lack of designated sorting and storage spaces
- Absence of city-level by-laws recognizing informal workers
- Poor coordination between agencies and informal actors

Workers consistently emphasized that bans and exclusion worsen insecurity and unemployment, rather than improving waste management.

Key insight: Current governance approaches undermine, rather than leverage, informal waste systems.

8. Aspirations and Vision for the Future

Despite challenges, nearly all respondents expressed commitment to remaining in the sector. Aspirations include:

- Expanding aggregation businesses
- Acquiring trucks and better tools
- Directly supplying large recycling companies
- Formal recognition without loss of autonomy

They seek integration, not displacement.

Key insight: Informal waste workers envision a future within a more inclusive, organized, and dignified waste management system.



Overall Conclusion: The KIIs from Apo Pantaker reveal an organized but underappreciated informal waste economy that delivers essential environmental services, supports thousands of dependents, and sustains Abuja’s recycling chain. The core challenges, harassment, unsafe conditions, lack of space, and exclusion from policy, are governance failures rather than worker deficiencies. Recognising, supporting, and integrating informal waste workers is not only a social justice imperative, but a practical solution to Abuja’s waste management crisis.

2

Thematic analysis of the KIIs from Apo Primary–Kabusa. This builds on the Apo Pantaker analysis and clearly highlights what is similar and distinct about this cluster.

1. Entry Pathways: Displacement, Youth Survival, and Education Gaps

Many respondents entered informal waste work due to forced displacement, insecurity, or lack of formal employment, rather than choice. Some fled banditry and insurgency from rural areas, while others were students, school leavers, or construction workers seeking immediate income. Unlike Apo Pantaker, where long-term career transitions were more common, Apo Primary–Kabusa workers more frequently described waste work as temporary or survival-based, especially among younger respondents.

Key insight: Informal waste work here acts as a buffer for displacement, youth unemployment, and insecurity, often viewed as a temporary means of survival rather than a long-term career path

2. Nature of Work: Street Picking Dominates, with EcoBarter as Anchor

Most respondents are street pickers or truck-supported workers, walking long distances (often 20–50 km daily) or following compactors and trucks. Collection focuses heavily on plastics, rubbers, cartons, paper, and metals, with EcoBarter acting as a central buyer, organiser, and stabilising force.

Unlike Apo Pantaker, where independent aggregators are more visible, this cluster shows greater dependence on a single structured buyer (EcoBarter) for:

- Weighing and pricing
- Storage space
- PPE (in some cases)
- Informal welfare support

Key insight: EcoBarter plays a quasi-formal role, partially filling governance and coordination gaps.

3. Income Patterns: Highly Variable and Market-Dependent

Reported earnings show wide fluctuation:

- Daily earnings range from ₦500 to ₦5,000, depending on access, market prices, and energy levels
- Weekly income commonly falls between ₦10,000 and ₦20,000
- Monthly income can reach ₦50,000 – ₦60,000 for more active or organised workers
- Many respondents emphasised that income is unreliable, with “good days and bad days,” and often insufficient for long-term stability.

Key insight: Income volatility is more pronounced here than in Apo Pantaker, reinforcing perceptions of waste work as temporary.

4. Health, Safety, and Food Insecurity

Health risks are severe and normalised:

- Frequent injuries from needles, metals, razors, and broken glass
- Minimal or no first aid; wounds often untreated
- Consumption of discarded food and drinks from dumpsites due to hunger
- Limited PPE use, except where EcoBarter provides gear

Some respondents explicitly rejected the notion that illness is connected to waste work, reflecting coping rationalization instead of safety.

Key insight: This cluster reflects deeper poverty-linked health vulnerability than Apo Pantaker.

5. Harassment, Criminalisation, and Gendered Suspicion

Across interviews, harassment by police, security personnel, and residents was a dominant theme. Workers are frequently:

- Accused of theft
- Assaulted or chased from estates
- Temporarily banned from operating

A strong gender pattern emerged:

- Women are often tolerated in estates

- Men are more heavily suspected and targeted. Respondents linked bans directly to increased drug use, and theft, highlighting unintended consequences of exclusion.

Key insight: Criminalisation directly undermines community safety and livelihoods.

6. Associations vs. Isolation

There is a sharp divide between:

- Workers connected to EcoBarter, who receive some protection, training, or medical reimbursement
- Independent pickers, who lack any form of collective support

Unlike Apo Pantaker, where strong associations (WAPAN, Bola-Bola, Scrap Dealers) play governance roles, many Apo Primary–Kabusa workers remain unorganised and exposed.

Key insight: Organisational affiliation is the single strongest factor shaping safety, dignity, and income stability.

7. Identity, Dignity, and Contradictory Aspirations

Respondents expressed deep ambivalence:

- Some defended waste work as honest, profitable, and dignified
- Others openly prayed to exit the occupation if alternatives emerged
- Many rejected social stigma but internalised shame over appearance and public perception

Education does not shield workers from stigma; several educated respondents noted they are judged solely by dirty clothing and location of work.

Key insight: Waste work is simultaneously a source of pride, shame, survival, and aspiration.

8. Future Visions: Exit, Upgrade, or Expand

Three future pathways emerged:

1. Exit strategy – move into transport (keke, okada), farming, or small trade
2. Upgrade within sector – become vendors, aggregators, or truck owners
3. Expansion and formal entrepreneurship – replicate EcoBarter–style models

Government support is mainly sought for capital, land, or equipment, not for bureaucratic control.

Key insight: Workers seek mobility and choice, not permanent informality.



Overall Conclusion: The Apo Primary–Kabusa KIIs reveal an extremely vulnerable but economically active segment of Abuja’s informal waste system. These workers provide essential environmental services under conditions of displacement, insecurity, stigma, and health risk, with minimal state support. Where structure exists (EcoBarter), outcomes improve, demonstrating that integration, not exclusion, is the most effective policy pathway.

3

Thematic analysis of the KIIs from Gwagwalada Cluster, focusing on informal waste workers and sorters, most of whom are women working within a semi-structured recycling enterprise. This analysis complements the earlier Apo Pantaker and Apo Primary–Kabusa findings and highlights what is distinct about Gwagwalada

1. Entry Pathways: Widows, Displacement, and Loss of Livelihoods

Many respondents began working in waste management due to various economic shocks, such as losing a spouse, facing eviction, experiencing business disruptions, or becoming unemployed. Several women who participated in the study were former tailors, traders (in yam, ice blocks, and poultry), or small business owners whose livelihoods collapsed because of displacement, enforcement actions, or bereavement. Unlike in Apo Primary–Kabusa, entering this field here is less about youth survival and more about the responsibilities and resilience of women as household heads.

Key insight: Waste work in Gwagwalada functions as a gendered coping strategy for women facing widowhood, eviction, or loss of informal businesses.

2. Nature of Work: Sorting, Processing, and Semi-Formal Employment

Unlike the street-picking dominance seen in Apo locations, Gwagwalada workers are primarily:

- Sorters
- Machine operators
- Supervisors

Most do not roam the city; waste is brought in by agents or workers. Tasks include sorting PET bottles, removing labels, cleaning plastics, and feeding recycling machines. This indicates a more industrial, fixed-site model compared to other clusters.

Key insight: Gwagwalada represents a more settled and semi-formal node within the informal recycling economy.

3. Income Structure: Monthly Wages, Not Daily Hustle

Income here is salary-based, not daily earnings:

- Sorters: ₦39,000 – ₦45,000/month
- Operators/Supervisors: ₦50,000 – ₦55,000/month

While incomes are more predictable, most respondents stated that wages are insufficient relative to workload and household responsibilities, especially for women supporting children alone.

Key insight: Predictability improves stability, but low wages and deductions limit the actual security of a livelihood.

4. Working Hours, Labour Intensity, and Health

Workers typically work 8 am–6 pm, standing for long hours under the sun. Common health issues include:

- Fatigue and body pain
- Headaches, stomach aches (especially for new workers)
- High blood pressure (BP), especially among older women
- Exposure to heat and chemicals

Unlike at Apo Primary–Kabusa, PPE use is relatively consistent (gloves, boots, and nose masks), and some training has been provided by NGOs, NESREA, the Fire Service, or the company.

Key insight: Health risks here are less about injuries and more about chronic strain, heat exposure, and long-term illness.

5. Gendered Labour and Care Burdens

This cluster is overwhelmingly female, and gender dynamics are central:

- Women balance full-day labour with childcare and domestic work
- Widows and single mothers rely solely on this income
- Some report an increased workload without a pay adjustment
- Differentiation between men and women has increased under new management

Despite this, women report less harassment than street pickers and relatively safer work environments.

Key insight: Gwagwalada highlights the double burden of productive and reproductive labour borne by women in the waste economy.

6. Public Perception and Stigma

Across interviews, respondents reported being:

- Looked down upon
- Mocked or avoided
- Considered “dirty” or unfit

Some noted that people refuse to eat their food due to their occupation. However, unlike Apo clusters, stigma here is endured rather than actively contested, with many respondents expressing resignation rather than anger.

Key insight: Social stigma persists even within semi-formal settings, reinforcing class and gender prejudice.

7. Training, Support, and Weak Collective Organisation

Some workers received:

- Safety training (NESREA, NGOs, Fire Service)
- PPE distribution by management

However, formal associations are largely absent. Identity is tied to the company rather than to independent worker organisations, limiting collective bargaining power.

Key insight: Company-based organisation offers stability but reduces worker voice and advocacy capacity.

8. Aspirations and Exit Pathways

A strong theme across interviews is the desire to exit waste work:

- Start small businesses (shops, ice block, clothing)
- Build or secure housing
- Reduce physical strain with age
- Only a few see long-term futures in recycling, despite acknowledging its benefits.

Key insight: Waste work is widely viewed as transitional, even when it provides stability.

Overall Conclusion: The Gwagwalada KIIs reveal a gendered, semi-formal segment of Nigeria’s informal recycling economy, where women often widowed or displaced find relative stability through fixed-site work. However, low wages, long hours, health strain, and persistent stigma limit the sector’s ability to provide dignified and sustainable livelihoods. While safer than street picking, this model still requires stronger labour protections, fair wages, health safeguards, and recognition of women’s central role.



4

Thematic analysis of KIIs from the CBN Karu Site (informal waste workers), highlighting distinct vulnerabilities, livelihood patterns, and governance gaps in this cluster, and how it differs from Apo and Gwagwalada.

1. Entry Pathways: Extreme Poverty and Informality

Respondents entered waste picking mainly due to a lack of alternatives, unemployment, and the need to support their families. In contrast to the semi-formal employment found in Gwagwalada or the aggregation roles at Apo Pantaker, the entry into waste picking is often unstructured and spontaneous. New individuals typically join others already working at the dumpsite without any training or onboarding.

Key insight: CBN Karu represents the most informal and precarious entry point into Abuja's waste economy.

2. Nature of Work: Dumpsite and Street-Based Scavenging

Work is dominated by early-morning scavenging across dumpsites, bins, drainage channels, and residential streets. Workers walk long distances (often starting as early as 4–6 am) carrying sacks by hand or with push carts.

Collected materials include:

- Plastics (dominant)
- Cartons and paper
- Scrap metals and rubber

Key insight: Labour intensity is high, tools are rudimentary, and productivity is low.

3. Income Levels: Very Low and Unstable

Income is among the lowest across all clusters:

- Daily income ranges from ₦2,000 – ₦5,000 on good days
- Weekly income can be as low as ₦3,000 – ₦7,000
- Monthly income may fall below ₦15,000

Many respondents described the work as “no longer productive”, insufficient even for basic needs.

Key insight: This cluster reflects working poverty, not just informality.

4. Health and Safety Risks: Severe and Unmanaged

Health and safety conditions are extremely poor:

- Minimal or no PPE use
- Frequent injuries from sharp objects
- Self-medication with antibiotics or cloth bandages
- Exposure to drains, smoke, and decomposing waste

Unlike Gwagwalada, no systematic training or PPE support exists.

Key insight: Health risks are acute and untreated, increasing long-term vulnerability.

5. Harassment, Criminalisation, and Gender Bias

Harassment by police, security agents, and residents is systemic:

- Frequent arrests and extortion
- Constant suspicion of theft
- Men disproportionately targeted
- Respondents repeatedly noted that women are less harassed, reinforcing gendered suspicion dynamics.

Key insight: Criminalisation is a defining feature of the CBN Karu experience.

6. Organisation and Social Support

Formal associations are absent. Support is limited to:

- Informal solidarity among workers at the dumpsite
- Occasional food or money support during illness

There is no access to:

- Worker IDs
- Negotiated routes
- Collective bargaining
- Structured buyers

Key insight: Lack of organisation compounds exploitation and insecurity.

7. Public Perception and Dignity

Respondents reported being labelled:

- “Thieves”
- “Stupid”
- “Useless”

Despite this, many continue due to necessity. Emotional distress and resignation are evident.

Key insight: Social stigma reinforces exclusion and undermines dignity.

8. Aspirations: Exit-Oriented and Desperate

Most respondents expressed a strong desire to leave waste picking:

- Start farming or trading
- Learn another vocation
- Join government or formal waste agencies

Requests to the government focus on bins, licensing, recognition, and freedom from harassment, rather than on expanding current work.

Key insight: Waste work here is a last resort, not a pathway to upward mobility.



Overall Conclusion: The CBN Karu Site key informant interviews (KIIs) reveal that the most marginalized segment of Abuja’s informal waste economy faces severe poverty, significant health risks, criminalization, and a lack of organization. Unlike other clusters, waste picking in this area does not provide stability or opportunities for advancement. This situation underscores the urgent need for humanitarian assistance, regulatory measures, and livelihood interventions, rather than solely focusing on recycling policies.

5

Thematic analysis of key informant interviews from Kpegeyi Dumpsite, focusing on the longest-serving, most entrenched, and most criminalized segment of the informal waste economy among the six communities studied.

1. Entry Pathways: Long-Term Informality, Early Child Labour, and Migration

Kpegeyi is notable for its early involvement in waste work. Many respondents began collecting waste as children, starting as young as Primary 2 or 3, often to support their education or help their families survive. There is a common trend of migration from Kano, Nasarawa, and neighboring regions, driven by economic collapse, loss of livelihoods, or family hardships. Unlike other clusters, many workers in Kpegeyi have over 15 years of experience, indicating that waste work is viewed as a long-term occupation rather than a short-term survival strategy.

Key insight: Kpegeyi represents intergenerational informality, where waste picking becomes a lifelong survival strategy.

2. Nature of Work: Dumpsite-Centred, All-Materials Collection

Work is centred almost entirely around the Kpegeyi dumpsite, with limited street movement due to fear of harassment. Workers collect everything of value plastics, cartons, rubber, metals, tins, cans, and leathers often sorting manually on-site.

Tools are extremely basic:

- Bare hands
- Sacks and wheelbarrows
- Occasional pushcarts

Storage space is critically insufficient, resulting in waste overflow onto roads and residential areas.

Key insight: Labour is intensive, unmechanised, and constrained by space and poor dumpsite management.

3. Income Patterns: Slightly Higher than CBN Karu, Still Precarious

Income varies but remains unstable:

- Daily earnings typically ₦1,500 – ₦3,000
- Weekly earnings ₦7,000 – ₦10,000
- Monthly income around ₦25,000 – ₦30,000 for consistent workers

A few experienced workers report slightly higher earnings, but price volatility and buyer control remain major issues.

Key insight: Longevity in the sector does not guarantee income security.

4. Health and Safety: Chronic Injury, Illness, and Normalised Risk

Health risks are severe and long-term:

- Frequent cuts, infections, and untreated wounds
- Exposure to decomposing waste, carcasses, faeces, and toxic materials
- Chronic illness linked to untreated injuries and prolonged exposure
- Minimal PPE use due to cost and scarcity
- Self-treatment (cloth bandages, paracetamol) is the norm; hospital visits are rare.

Key insight: Income stability in the sector is elusive, as even experienced workers struggle against price volatility and buyer influence, while health risks persist severely due to inadequate protection and healthcare services.

5. Harassment, Violence, and Mass Arrests

Criminalisation is systemic and violent at Kpegeyi:

- Regular police raids, arrests, and extortion
- Detention without charges; prolonged incarceration
- Collective punishment for crimes committed elsewhere
- Destruction or seizure of collected materials and food

Several respondents described detention lasting weeks, hunger in custody, and inability to pay bail.

Key insight: In Kpegeyi, systemic violence is evident through police raids, arbitrary arrests, and collective punishments, resulting in prolonged detentions and significant hardships for individuals.

6. Gender Dynamics: Men Targeted, Women Shielded

A strong consensus emerged:

- Men are routinely suspected, arrested, and assaulted
- Women face less suspicion and can access spaces men cannot
- However, women in waste work are described as socially vulnerable and stigmatised
- Men see criminalisation as gendered and deeply unfair.

Key insight: Gender shapes both risk and access in informal waste work.

7. Organisation, Trust, and Internal Regulation

Formal associations are absent, but informal self-regulation exists:

- New entrants are vetted
- Theft is discouraged to protect collective survival
- Storage spaces are informally allocated
- However, internal disputes can trigger external crackdowns, exposing the fragility of informal governance.

Key insight: Informal governance exists but lacks protection or legitimacy.

8. Public Perception and Psychological Impact

Respondents consistently reported being labelled:

- Thieves
- Criminals
- Mai Bowla (Garbage people)
-

This stigma generates anger, frustration, resignation, and emotional distress. Some respondents expressed fear of reacting violently when falsely accused.

Key insight: Stigma causes psychological harm alongside economic exclusion.

9. Aspirations: Capital, Exit, or Controlled Upgrading

Despite long tenure, most respondents want to leave waste picking:

- Open small shops
- Buy vehicles and drive
- Become buyers/aggregators instead of pickers

Only a few envision staying in waste work, and only with capital, equipment, and recognition.

Key insight: Even veteran waste pickers view the job as unsustainable.



Overall Conclusion: The Kpegeyi KIIs reveal the deepest layer of exclusion and endurance within Abuja's informal waste system. Workers here have survived years sometimes decades of hazardous labour, criminalisation, and stigma, yet continue to provide essential environmental services. The evidence strongly suggests that forced eviction, harassment, or neglect will worsen poverty and insecurity, while recognition, protection, and livelihood transition support could unlock safer and more sustainable outcomes.

6

Thematic analysis of the KIIs from Nyanyan–Karu, drawing across all five interviews and highlighting the distinctive features of this cluster within Abuja’s informal waste economy

1. Entry Pathways: Livelihood Switching and Survival Choices

Most respondents entered the waste collection sector after losing or abandoning previous livelihoods, which included shoemaking, shoe shining, farming, construction labor, vegetable trading, or prolonged unemployment. Their transition was often facilitated by peer networks, particularly connections with relatives already working in waste management. In contrast to Kpegeyi, where child labor was prevalent, workers in Nyanyan–Karu generally entered the field as adults. They often made these pragmatic switches in pursuit of higher pay than other informal jobs offered to them.

Key insight: Waste picking here is a deliberate economic choice, not just a last-resort survival measure.

2. Nature of Work: Highly Mobile, Long-Distance Collection

Nyanyan–Karu workers are among the most mobile across all clusters studied. Respondents reported daily movement across Nyanya, Mararaba, Karu, Jikwoyi, Abattoir, Area 1, City College, and surrounding communities, often covering long distances on foot or in wheelbarrows or trucks. Collection focuses on leather, cartons, plastic bottles, metals, and paper, with materials selected based on availability and resale value.

Key insight: High mobility expands earning potential but increases physical strain and exposure to harassment.

3. Income Patterns: Variable but Sometimes Relatively Higher

Income is highly variable, fluctuating by day and market conditions:

- Daily earnings range from ₦2,000 – ₦5,000, with some reporting up to ₦10,000 on very good days
- Weekly income commonly ranges from ₦8,000 – ₦15,000
- Monthly income may reach ₦30,000 – ₦40,000 for consistent workers

Some respondents described income as sufficient for basic needs, while others stressed it remains inadequate for family responsibilities. None reported alternative income sources.

Key insight: Compared to CBN Karu and Kpegeyi, Nyanyan–Karu shows greater income upside, though instability remains.

4. Tools, Storage, and Infrastructure Constraints

Workers rely on rudimentary tools—sacks, gloves, boots, wheelbarrows, and a push carts. While some respondents reported having relatively adequate storage near the dumpsite, overcrowding and irregular evacuation of waste by authorities frequently disrupt work. Several noted that waste can remain uncollected for weeks or even a month, spilling onto roads and affecting traffic and storage space.

Key insight: Infrastructure failures directly reduce productivity and safety.

5. Health and Safety: Partial Awareness, Limited Protection

Most respondents acknowledged health risks and reported using basic PPE such as gloves, boots, and masks. Injuries (cuts to hands and legs) and illness were common, with treatment typically limited to chemist visits or self-medication. Some respondents downplayed links between illness and waste work, reflecting risk normalization rather than absence of danger.

Key insight: Safety awareness exists, but protection remains minimal and self-funded.

6. Harassment, Stigma, and Public Perception

Social stigma emerged as a dominant challenge. Respondents reported being viewed as:

- Thieves
- Mad or insane
- Disgusting or worthless

This perception causes emotional distress, depression, and anger, even among those who say they have “gotten used to it.” Compared to Kpegeyi, reports of mass arrests were fewer, but constant suspicion and verbal harassment were widespread.

Key insight: Stigma is the most persistent barrier to dignity in this cluster.

7. Organisation and Collective Support

Levels of organisation are mixed. Some respondents belong to waste picker associations that provide intervention during police disputes, while others operate independently with no collective backing. Association membership appears to reduce vulnerability to arrest and confiscation, but coverage is inconsistent.

Key insight: Organised workers experience greater protection, though associations remain weak and fragmented.

8. Gendered Experiences and Social Expectations

Most respondents perceived little operational differ-

ence in treatment between men and women, though some expressed strong cultural views that women “should not” do waste work. Men reported pressure to earn income as household providers, reinforcing acceptance of risky and stigmatized labour.

Key insight: Gender norms shape expectations and burden, even where overt discrimination is limited.

9. Aspirations and Future Pathways

Across interviews, waste work is widely seen as temporary. Aspirations include:

- Opening small shops or businesses
- Buying trucks and becoming aggregators
- Returning to school or joining the military
- Exiting waste work entirely within 5 years

Respondents generally support government assistance with tools, capital, and infrastructure, but express caution about arrangements in which government work may go unpaid.

Key insight: Workers seek upward mobility and autonomy, not permanent informality.



Overall Conclusion: The Nyanyan–Karu KIIs reveal a highly mobile, economically adaptive group of informal waste workers who navigate long distances, volatile markets, and intense stigma to sustain livelihoods. While income potential can be higher than in other dumpsite-based clusters, insecurity, poor infrastructure, weak organisation, and social exclusion continue to limit dignity and long-term stability. Targeted support, especially in tools, waste evacuation, recognition, and collective organisation, could significantly improve outcomes without undermining workers’ autonomy.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Findings: Informal Waste Pickers in Abuja

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with informal waste pickers in various locations across Abuja, including the Karu and Apo Dumpsites, Gwagwalada, and Apo Primary (Kabusa). The participants, both men and women, were involved in activities such as waste picking, sorting, aggregation, and recycling. These discussions provided a collective perspective on the daily realities, social relationships, governance challenges, and aspirations within the informal waste sector.

The insights gathered from the FGDs largely align with the findings from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), reinforcing key themes such as the criminalization and stigma faced by waste pickers, health and safety risks, informal self-regulation, exclusion from formal waste management systems, and the demand for recognition, supportive spaces, tools, and capital. Additionally, the FGDs brought to light important aspects that were less prominent in the individual interviews, including a strong collective identity and defense of legitimacy, established internal norms and discipline, political awareness coupled with distrust of the government, pronounced gender norms and patriarchal views, as well as shared narratives of dignity, injustice, and resistance.

Overall, the FGDs validate the KIIs' findings and enhance their credibility by revealing social dynamics, power relations, and collective meaning-making that could not be fully captured in individual interviews alone.

1. Livelihoods and Daily Realities

Participants in all focus group discussions (FGDs) reported that informal waste collection serves as a primary livelihood strategy due to unemployment, limited access to formal job opportunities, and the necessity to provide for families and dependents. They characterized waste work as honest labor that supports survival, despite its physically demanding nature, social stigma, and economic instability.

Many participants highlighted that although their incomes vary significantly, waste collection enables them to meet essential needs, such as food, rent, and family support. Several mentioned that they had previous trades, education, or skills but lacked the capital or connections to secure alternative livelihoods.

2. Health, Safety, and Risk Normalisation

Health and safety risks were a major concern in the focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants reported frequent cuts, injuries, infections, and exposure to hazardous waste, including sharp objects and decomposing materials. In some instances, serious injuries, including amputations and fatalities, were noted.

Many participants exhibited a strong inclination towards normalizing these risks and adopting a fatalistic attitude, often downplaying the health impacts by attributing illnesses to fate or divine will. Self-treatment practices, involving chemists, peer support, or home remedies, were common due to limited access to formal healthcare and a lack of occupational health protections.

3. Criminalisation, Stigma, and Public Perception

A dominant and emotionally charged theme across all FGDs was criminalisation and social stigma. Participants consistently reported being labelled as thieves, criminals, vandals, or nuisances by residents, security agencies, and authorities. These perceptions were described as leading to harassment, arrests, eviction from workspaces, and physical attacks.

FGD participants strongly rejected these labels, asserting that:

- Waste pickers collect only discarded materials
- Criminal acts such as vandalism are carried out by outsiders or "bad eggs"
- Honest workers actively distance themselves from illegal activities

This stigma was reported to have profound psychological effects, including anger, frustration, shame, and a sense of exclusion from society.

4. Informal Governance, Self-Regulation, and Collective Discipline

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) revealed a strong sense of collective identity and self-regulation among waste pickers. Participants described the informal rules, leadership structures, and shared norms that govern behavior within their groups. Theft, vandalism, and misconduct were widely condemned, and many said offenders would be reported to authorities to protect the group's reputation and survival.

This self-regulation was seen as essential, given the lack of formal recognition and the constant threat of

collective punishment from security agencies. Participants viewed internal discipline as a way to assert their legitimacy and demonstrate responsibility.

5. Engagement with Formal Waste Management Systems

Participants were aware of formal waste management agencies and private contractors but expressed deep mistrust and dissatisfaction with the current arrangements. Focus group discussions (FGDs) highlighted the following perceptions:

- Nepotism and exclusion in recruitment
- Inadequate coverage of formal waste collection
- Lack of recognition for the contributions of informal workers

While participants were generally open to collaborating with the government, this willingness was conditional on several factors: the recognition of their work, welfare support, provision of tools and space, and respect for existing informal systems. There was strong resistance to being absorbed as casual labor without adequate protections or fair compensation.

6. Gender Dynamics and Power Relations

Discussions during the focus group discussions (FGDs) highlighted strongly gendered norms and power dynamics related to waste work. While women were recognized as active participants, particularly in sorting and segregation, many male participants expressed the belief that waste picking is fundamentally “men’s work,” suggesting that women’s involvement should be temporary.

Some statements from the FGDs reflected explicit patriarchal attitudes, including the belief that men should dominate decision-making, while women should prioritize domestic roles. However, participants also noted that women often earn the same as men for comparable work, indicating a contradiction between economic realities and social norms.

7. Aspirations, Dignity, and Future Pathways

In all focus group discussions (FGDs), waste picking

was commonly viewed as a temporary and undesirable profession, even among those who had been working in the field for a long time. Participants shared their aspirations to:

- Access funding to start small businesses
- Transition into aggregation, recycling, or waste management enterprises
- Leave the sector altogether for other trades or professions

Despite these aspirations, participants expressed pride and dignity in their work, highlighting its contribution to environmental cleanliness and public health. Many urged society and the government to recognize the value of their labor instead of treating them with contempt.

8. Key Collective Demands

The focus group discussions (FGDs) across various locations highlighted a set of clear demands from participants:

- Official recognition and protection from harassment.
- Designated work and storage spaces.
- Access to personal protective equipment (PPE), tools, and healthcare.
- Financial support or capital for business development.
- Inclusion in waste management planning and decision-making.

Participants emphasized that exclusion and repression could exacerbate poverty and insecurity, while inclusion and support would enhance both livelihoods and urban sanitation outcomes. The FGDs revealed that informal waste pickers are a self-organized, economically active, and politically aware group. They navigate stigma, risk, and exclusion through a collective identity and informal governance. Although they are deeply vulnerable, participants articulated clear visions for dignity, recognition, and economic mobility. This underscores the importance of developing inclusive and context-specific waste management policies in Abuja.

“Voices from the Waste Frontlines: Dignity, Risk and the Fight for Recognition”

<p>We are skilled, not helpless</p>  <p>Many of us here are educated—graduates, mechanics, welders—but we have no capital.</p>	<p>This work keeps us alive</p>  <p>This work is how we raise money to survive and plan for something better.</p>	<p>Support can change our path</p>  <p>If we get support, we can leave this work and start proper businesses.</p>
<p>We are trapped, not lazy</p>  <p>We are not lazy. We are trapped.</p>		<p>No one wants this forever</p> <p>Nobody wants to do this work forever.</p>  <p>Stop suffering for the next generation</p> <p>Help us now so that this suffering does not continue to the next generation.</p>
<p>We can build companies</p>  <p>With capital, we can open our own waste companies and employ others.</p>	<p>We want a better future</p>  <p>We want a better future for the people coming after us.</p>	

<p>They choose only their own</p>  <p>They choose only their own people. If we wait for them to employ us, we will starve.</p>	<p>Work with us</p>  <p>We are already doing the work. They should work with us, not push us away.</p>	<p>We go where others don't</p>  <p>Formal workers don't pick waste in gutters and streets like we do.</p>	<p>We clear what others leave</p>  <p>We clear what others leave behind.</p>
<p>Recognition changes everything</p>  <p>If the government recognises us, people will stop treating us like criminals.</p>	<p>We need our own space</p>  <p>We need a place we can call our own. We are tired of being chased away.</p>	<p>Recognition protects our health</p>  <p>Recognition will reduce harassment and protect our health.</p>	<p>We are not asking for charity</p>  <p>We are not asking for free money. We are asking to be recognised for the work we already do.</p>

<p>We risk our lives Yes, we get injured. People step on on nails, cut themselves, even lose their lives.</p> 	<p>Injuries can be fatal One of us stepped on a nail and lost his leg. Another died because he could not treat his injury.</p> 	<p>No safety equipment We don't have safety equipment. When we are injured, we treat ourselves.</p> 
<p>No choice but to work We survive because we have no choice.</p> 	<p>We reject bad eggs We already agreed among ourselves that we will not allow bad eggs among us.</p> 	<p>We hand thieves to police If we suspect anyone of stealing, we will hand them over to the police ourselves.</p> 
<p>One misbehaviour hurts all We know that if one person misbehaves, all of us will suffer.</p> 		<p>We have leaders We have leaders here, and we know who belongs and who does not.</p> 

<p>We are not thieves</p>  <p>People think we are criminals, but we are only picking what has been thrown away. We are not thieves.</p>	<p>Our work feeds families</p>  <p>They look at us like we are useless, but this work is how we feed our families and keep the city clean.</p>	<p>Dirty work, honest work</p>  <p>We are doing dirty work, but it is honest work.</p>	<p>We reject crime</p>  <p>If you see someone stealing, that person is not one of us. We don't accept that behaviour.</p>
<p>Punished for others' crimes</p>  <p>When something is stolen somewhere else, they come and arrest all of us here.</p>	<p>Guilty by appearance</p>  <p>They don't investigate. They just see waste pickers and assume we are guilty.</p>	<p>We have suffered enough</p>  <p>We have suffered arrests, beatings, and harassment for crimes we did not commit.</p>	<p>Target criminals, not workers</p>  <p>If the government wants criminals, they should look for criminals—not punish people working.</p>

The Government Perspectives: Interview Analysis with AMAC and NESREA

a. Institutional Roles and System Fragmentation

Both AMAC (the local government) and NESREA (the federal regulatory agency) characterize the waste governance system as fragmented, with overlapping responsibilities and ambiguous operational boundaries. AMAC highlights the changing division of responsibilities among AMAC, AEPB, and STDD, particularly as rural areas begin to urbanize. In contrast, NESREA defines its role strictly as a regulatory and standards-setting body, rather than as a waste operator.

Key insight: Governance fragmentation explains weak data, poor coordination, and inconsistent engagement with informal workers.

b. Data Gaps and Systemic Weaknesses

Both institutions recognize that there is a lack of reliable data on waste, insufficient source separation, inadequate infrastructure, and limited processing facilities. NESREA explicitly states that waste generation significantly exceeds collection efforts, resulting in environmental pollution. Additionally, AMAC points out that mixed settlements render standard waste management models ineffective.

Alignment with field reality: This confirms informal workers' observations of overflowing dumpsites and inadequate waste management..

c. Recognition of Informal Waste Workers

Both AMAC and NESREA recognize informal waste workers as essential.

- AMAC describes them as “integral” and acknowledges that they often intervene when formal systems fail.
- NESREA highlights their role as key players in last-mile and rural waste recovery, particularly for plastics and e-waste.

However, their approaches to engagement differ:

- AMAC advocates for direct integration of these workers through community-based collection models.
- In contrast, NESREA favors indirect integration through cooperatives, Producer Responsibility Organizations (PROs), and the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework.

Key tension: Recognition exists, but the institutional pathway to inclusion differs.

d. Integration, Formalisation, and Control

AMAC's approach is operational and decentralised, proposing:

- Door-to-door collection
- Youth engagement
- Community committees and locally-driven programs
- Informal workers as service providers in hard-to-reach areas

NESREA's approach is regulatory and risk-focused, emphasising:

- PPE use
- Restrictions on hazardous activities (e-waste dismantling)
- Cooperative membership
- Compliance with EPR rules
- Risk identified by both: Informal workers may resist reforms due to distrust, fear of job loss, or low awareness.

e. Policy Direction

Both institutions converge on:

- Source separation as a priority
- Healthcare access for informal workers
- EPR enforcement as critical to sustainability
- NESREA places greater emphasis on producer accountability and lifecycle responsibility, while AMAC focuses on community-level service delivery.



Private-Sector Perspectives: Interview Analysis with Recyclers, Social Enterprises, and Waste Worker Associations

(Trash Monger, EcoBarter, Chanja Datti, Recyclers Association of Nigeria -RAN and Waste Pickers Association of Nigeria - WAPAN)

The private sector interviews show that the waste ecosystem is diverse yet highly interconnected, involving technology-driven recyclers, aggregators, social enterprises, and worker-led associations. Although these entities differ in scale and approach, they strongly agree on the importance of informal waste workers, the presence of systemic market failures, and the pressing need for government-supported formalization.

1. Informal Waste Workers as the Backbone of Recycling

All private-sector organizations, including Trash Monger, RAN, EcoBarter, Chanja Datti, and WAPAN, agree that informal waste workers supply the majority of recyclable materials in Nigeria.

- EcoBarter estimates that 60% to 80% of its recovery volume comes from informal waste pickers, often referred to as “vendors.” This is largely due to their extensive street-level networks and low operating costs.
- Similarly, RAN and Trash Monger describe informal workers as a critical last-mile system,

emphasizing that recycling would not succeed without them.

- WAPAN refers to its members as “waste recovery agents,” rejecting the term “scavengers” and highlighting their role as providers of environmental services.

Key insight: Unlike government actors who frame informal workers as complementary, private-sector actors consistently describe them as structurally indispensable.

2. Market Volatility, Pricing Power, and Unequal Value Capture

Interviews conducted in the private sector indicate that pricing throughout the recycling value chain is determined externally, primarily by international off-takers and manufacturers.

- EcoBarter confirms that neither recyclers nor associations have a significant influence on prices; even RAN lacks pricing power.
- As a result, price volatility affects waste pickers, leading to unstable incomes, while recyclers and manufacturers manage the risks through scale and storage capabilities.

This analysis complements findings from key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD) by identifying income precarity not as a result of worker behavior, but rather stemming from

global commodity dynamics and weak domestic processing capacity.

3. Logistics, Energy Costs, and Infrastructure as Binding Constraints

All private-sector actors identify logistics and energy costs as the single greatest operational barrier.

- Transporting recyclables often costs more than their resale value.
- Chanja Datti and Trash Monger note that poor road access and fuel costs undermine community collection models.
- EcoBarter emphasizes the high capital costs associated with innovation, such as reverse vending machines costing approximately ₦5 million each. This financial burden limits scalability despite strong public interest.

Key insight: The constraint is not a lack of willingness to scale, but structural inefficiencies and a lack of public investment.

4. Formalisation vs. Incorporation: A Shared Position

Across the private sector, there is strong alignment that formalisation must precede incorporation.

- WAPAN argues that without legal recognition, identification, and designated workspaces, workers remain criminalised and exposed to violence.
- EcoBarter and RAN emphasise that private initiatives (IDs, PPE, training) cannot protect workers without government legitimacy.
- Chanja Datti confirms that semi-formal arrangements reduce harassment only when recognised by authorities.

Shared position:

Recognition and legal backing first; operational integration second.

This directly mirrors informal workers' demands and challenges to state-led models that prioritise control over protection.

5. Role of Associations and Worker-Led Governance (WAPAN)

WAPAN introduces a dimension largely absent from other private actors: worker-led governance and social protection.

Key contributions include:

- Legal representation for arrested members
- Emergency health and welfare support
- Training with development partners (World Bank, UNICEF, GIZ)
- Advocacy against mass arrests and collective punishment
- Development of a worker registration and identification app to curb vandalism and improve accountability
- WAPAN also surfaces critical socio-political issues, including:
 - Widespread child labour linked to insurgency, displacement, and poverty
 - Severe deficits in water, sanitation, shelter, and dignity
 - Risks of radicalisation and insecurity when exclusion persists

Key insight: WAPAN reframes waste picking not just as an environmental issue but also as a social protection, labour, and security concern.

6. Gender Dynamics: Structural Barriers, Not Capability

Private-sector actors provide a more structural explanation of gender patterns:

- Women dominate sorting and aggregation, particularly in dumpsites and hubs (Chanja Datti, WAPAN).
- Exposure to chemicals, pregnancy risks, and lack of PPE are acute.
- Capital-intensive roles remain male-dominated due to financial exclusion, not skill gaps.
- This complements FGDs, which revealed patriarchal norms, by showing how structural inequalities reproduce gendered roles.

7. EPR and the Circular Economy: Opportunity with Risks

All private-sector actors support Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) in principle, but warn of exclusionary implementation.

- EcoBarter sees EPR as a potential financing and coordination mechanism, provided NESREA enforces it equitably across cities and scales.
- RAN and WAPAN stress that EPR must capture data on informal workers and their labour, not bypass them.

- There is concern that EPR could reinforce urban bias (Lagos and Abuja focused) and marginalise smaller operators.

Shared recommendation: EPR must be inclusive, transparent, and reinvest in collection, worker welfare, and local processing.

Analytical Takeaway The expanded private-sector analysis highlights that Nigeria's waste economy functions as a hybrid system, relying on informal labor, private investment, and weak public coordination. EcoBarter showcases the potential for innovation and inclusion, while WAPAN reveals the human and security costs associated with exclusion. Additionally, recyclers and aggregators point out failures in market dynamics and logistics. Together, they make a compelling case that formalisation without protection is ineffective, and protection without recognition is impossible.



Dimension	Government (AEPB, AMAC, NESREA)	Private Sector (Trash Monger, EcoBarter, Chanja Datti, RAN)	Informal Waste Workers (KIIs & FGDs)
Primary Role	Regulation, coordination, limited service delivery	Collection, aggregation, recycling, innovation	Last-mile collection, sorting, recovery
View of Informal Workers	Essential but poorly regulated	Backbone of recycling system	Workers providing essential public service
Recognition Status	Acknowledged but not formally recognised	Recognised economically and legally	Largely unrecognised and criminalised
Contribution to Waste Recovery	Limited due to capacity gaps	High but dependent on informal supply	Majority of recyclable recovery (60 – 90%)
Approach to Integration	Cooperatives, pilots, indirect inclusion	Formalisation first, then incorporation	Recognition, protection, then collaboration
Formalisation Priority	Regulation, compliance, standards	Legal identity, IDs, stable engagement	Safety, dignity, freedom from harassment
Health & Safety Perspective	PPE, standards, risk management	Productivity and cost-related concern	Daily exposure, injuries, self-treatment
Criminalisation & Harassment	Often unintended, enforcement-driven	Seen as counterproductive	Routine experience and core grievance
Data & Visibility	Weak data, fragmented systems	Partial data from operations	Largely invisible in official data
Market & Pricing Power	Minimal involvement	Determined by global off-takers	No pricing power; price takers
Infrastructure Constraints	Inadequate trucks, landfills, funding	Logistics, fuel, energy costs	Lack of space, storage, equipment
Gender Perspective	Limited gender-specific focus	Women dominate sorting; structural barriers	Gendered risks; strong patriarchal norms
Role of Associations	Preferred engagement channel	Needed for stability and coordination	Key for protection, solidarity, discipline
View on EPR	Regulatory tool for producer accountability	Financing and coordination mechanism	Opportunity if inclusive; fear of exclusion
Key Risks Identified	Non-compliance, disorder	Market volatility, scale constraints	Arrest, injury, poverty, exclusion
Aspirations for the System	Orderly, regulated waste management	Scalable, efficient, profitable recycling	Dignity, stability, upward mobility
Desired Government Action	Stronger enforcement, coordination	Clear policies, incentives, enforcement	Recognition, IDs, space, protection
Time Horizon	Gradual reform	Urgent system-wide change	Immediate relief and long-term pathways

Chapter 4 - Theory of Change: Inclusive Waste Governance Leveraging Informal Waste Actors

Problem Statement

Nigeria's urban waste management system is marked by rapid waste growth, limited public capacity, fragmented governance, and high unemployment rates. Informal waste workers play a crucial role in recovering the majority of recyclable materials and providing essential last-mile waste services. However, they are often unrecognized, marginalized, underpaid, and excluded from formal planning and investment processes. This exclusion negatively impacts environmental outcomes, worker welfare, and the overall efficiency of the waste management system.

Long-Term Impact (10–15 years)

An inclusive, efficient, and just waste management system that:

- Reduces environmental pollution and public health risks
- Creates decent livelihoods and upward mobility for informal waste workers
- Strengthens circular economy outcomes
- Improves urban sanitation and climate resilience

Intermediate Outcomes (3–7 years)

1. Formal recognition and protection of informal waste workers
2. Improved waste collection, recovery, and recycling rates
3. Reduced harassment, injuries, and social stigma
4. Fairer value distribution across the recycling chain
5. Stronger coordination between government, private sector, and worker associations

Short-Term Outcomes (1–3 years)

- Informal workers legally recognised as environmental service providers
- Functional worker registries, IDs, and designated workspaces
- Improved access to PPE, health services, and skills training
- Increased trust between informal workers, government agencies, and recyclers
- Reliable data on waste flows and informal labour contributions

Inputs (What is Invested)

Institutional & Policy Inputs

- Legal and policy reforms recognising informal waste work
- City-level by-laws and guidelines for inclusive waste governance
- Clear mandates across AEPB, AMAC, STDD, and NESREA

Financial Inputs

- EPR funds earmarked for collection and worker welfare
- Public–private investment in logistics, aggregation hubs, and storage
- Micro-grants and concessional finance for worker cooperatives

Human & Social Inputs

- Existing informal waste workers (skills, networks, reach)
- Worker associations (e.g. WAPAN and RAN)
- Private recyclers and social enterprises

Key Activities (What Can Be Done)

1. Recognition & Protection

- Register informal waste workers through associations and cooperatives
- Issue IDs, uniforms, and work permits
- Establish clear protocols to prevent harassment and mass arrests
- Awareness campaign drives for waste collection and recycling by informal waste workers

2. Inclusive Service Delivery

- Contract informal groups for door-to-door and last-mile collection
- Designate sorting, storage, and aggregation spaces
- Integrate informal workers into community waste systems

3. Health, Safety & Social Protection

- Provide PPE and safety training
- Link workers to basic health insurance and emergency care
- Introduce work accident reporting and compensation mechanisms

4. Market & Value Chain Reforms

- Promote transparent and stable pricing mechanisms

- Reduce middlemen dominance through cooperatives
- Strengthen local processing to reduce exposure to global price shocks

5. Data, Learning & Accountability

- Collect data on waste volumes, recovery rates, and labour conditions
- Involve workers in monitoring and feedback
- Public reporting to build trust and accountability

Outputs (What Is Produced)

- Registered and identifiable informal waste workforce
- Functional worker associations and cooperatives

Risks and Mitigation

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Forced formalisation excludes workers	Phase reforms; recognition first
Elite capture of EPR funds	Transparency, worker representation
Continued harassment despite registration	MoUs with security agencies
Market price shocks	Local processing, buffer pricing
Gender exclusion	Gender-responsive policies and safeguards

Causal Pathway (Logic Chain)

If informal waste workers are legally recognised, protected, and organised and if governments and private actors invest in inclusive infrastructure and fair markets then waste collection efficiency, recycling rates, and worker welfare will improve leading to cleaner cities, reduced pollution, decent livelihoods, and a resilient circular economy.

- Improved collection coverage and recovery volumes
- Reduced injuries, arrests, and evictions
- Shared data platforms across actors

Assumptions

- Informal workers are willing to engage if recognition precedes enforcement
- Government agencies are open to collaborative governance models
- The private sector values stability and scalability more than short-term profit opportunities.
- EPR mechanisms are enforced and funds are transparently managed

Why Informal Waste Actors Are Central (Core Insight)

- They already operate at scale
- They reach areas formal systems cannot
- They possess local knowledge and trust networks
- Replacing them would be cost-prohibitive and socially destabilising

Therefore: Inclusive governance is not a social add-on it is the most efficient and just pathway to sustainable waste management.



Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Nigeria's urban waste management system already operates as a hybrid formal–informal economy, with informal waste workers providing the bulk of last-mile collection, sorting, and recovery services. Across all sites studied, informal actors individually and collectively play a decisive role in reducing waste pollution, supporting recycling markets, and maintaining basic urban sanitation, often in contexts where formal systems are overstretched or absent.

Evidence from Key Informant Interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and stakeholder interviews with government agencies and private-sector actors reveals strong convergence on the indispensability of informal waste workers, alongside persistent gaps between recognition and practice. While government institutions acknowledge their contribution and private-sector actors depend heavily on their labour, informal workers continue to face criminalisation, unsafe working conditions, income insecurity, gendered vulnerabilities, and social stigma.

The findings further show that exclusionary approaches such as crackdowns, forced evictions, or narrowly technocratic reforms undermine both social outcomes and system efficiency. In contrast, inclusive models that prioritise recognition, protection, and partnership offer a more effective pathway to improved waste governance, higher recycling rates, and dignified livelihoods. The central challenge, therefore, is not whether to include informal waste actors, but how to institutionalise their role in a fair, coordinated, and sustainable manner.

Recommendations

1. Formal Recognition and Legal Protection

- Governments at federal and sub-national levels should formally recognise informal waste workers as environmental service providers, rather than treating them as illegal actors.
- Introduce worker registration, identification cards, and designated workspaces, developed in collaboration with worker associations.
- Establish clear protocols with security agencies to end harassment, arbitrary arrests, and collective punishment of waste workers.

2. Inclusive Waste Service Delivery Models

- Integrate informal waste groups into community-based and last-mile collection systems, especially in informal settlements and hard-to-reach areas.
- Pilot service contracts that allow organised waste picker groups and cooperatives to deliver collection and sorting services with fair remuneration.
- Recognise and support existing informal governance structures instead of replacing them.

3. Health, Safety, and Social Protection

- Provide basic occupational health and safety support, including PPE, safety training, and first-aid access.
- Facilitate access to basic health insurance and emergency medical care, particularly for injury-related risks.
- Ensure gender-responsive safeguards to address the specific health and safety needs of women in waste work.

4. Fair Value Chain and Market Reforms

- Promote transparent and stable pricing mechanisms to reduce income volatility for waste pickers.
- Support cooperatives and associations to strengthen bargaining power and reduce exploitation by middlemen.
- Invest in local processing and aggregation infrastructure to reduce exposure to global commodity price shocks.

5. Leverage Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for Inclusion

- Ensure EPR frameworks are inclusive of informal waste workers, not limited to large recyclers or urban elites.
- Ring-fence EPR funds for collection, worker welfare, logistics, and capacity building at the grassroots level.
- Strengthen enforcement and transparency to prevent exclusion and elite capture.

6. Strengthen Coordination and Data Systems

- Improve coordination between AEPB, AMAC, STDD, NESREA, and private actors through

clear mandates and shared platforms.

- b. Invest in data systems that capture informal waste flows and labour contributions, enabling evidence-based planning.
- c. Involve informal workers in monitoring, feedback, and learning processes.

7. Support Long-Term Livelihood Pathways

- a. Provide access to micro-grants, concessional finance, and skills training to enable upgrading within the waste sector or transition to other livelihoods.
- b. Encourage youth and women-led enterpris-

es within recycling and circular economy value chains.

- c. Frame waste work as a pathway to economic mobility, not a permanent condition of exclusion.

An inclusive approach to waste governance one that builds on the scale, knowledge, and resilience of informal waste actors offers Nigeria a practical and just pathway to cleaner cities, stronger recycling systems, and improved livelihoods. Recognition, protection, and partnership are not social concessions; they are preconditions for an effective and sustainable waste management system.



ANNEX

Comparative Table: Informal Waste Collectors across Study Locations across Abuja, synthesizing the KIIs into a single, policy-ready overview.

	Apo Pantaker	Apo Primary–Kabusa	Gwagwalada	CBN Karu Site	Kpegeyi Dumpsite	Nyanyan–Karu
Dominant Worker Profile	Male workers & aggregators	Youth, displaced pickers	Predominantly women (widows/single mothers)	Adult men in extreme poverty	Long-term male pickers (some child entry)	Adult male livelihood switchers
Entry Pathway	Economic transition from other trades	Displacement, insecurity, survival	Loss of spouse, eviction, business collapse	Unemployment, lack of alternatives	Early entry, migration, intergenerational poverty	Shift from farming, construction, shoemaking
Nature of Work	Collection, sorting, aggregation	Street & truck-based picking	Fixed-site sorting & processing	Dumpsite & street scavenging	Dumpsite-centred picking & sorting	Highly mobile street & dumpsite picking
Mobility Level	Medium	High	Low	Medium	Low	Very high
Waste Types Collected	Plastics, metals, cartons	Plastics, rubber, cartons	PET bottles, plastics	Plastics, paper, metals	Mixed recyclables	Leather, cartons, plastics, metals
Typical Income Range	₦2,500 – ₦7,000/day (role-based)	₦500 – ₦5,000/day	₦39,000 – ₦55,000/month	₦2,000 – ₦5,000/day (often lower)	₦1,500 – ₦3,000/day	₦2,000 – ₦5,000/day (up to ₦10k on good days)
Income Stability	Moderate	Low	Moderate–high	Very low	Low	Low–moderate
Health & Safety Risk	High	Very high	Moderate (chronic strain)	Extremely high	Extremely high (chronic)	High

PPE & Training	Minimal, irregular	Limited, EcoBarter and Trash Monger-linked	Relatively consistent PPE, Chanja Dattilinked	None	Very limited	Partial, self-funded
Harassment & Criminalisation	High	High	Low	Severe	Extreme	Moderate
Gender Dynamics	Male-dominated	Male-dominated	Female-dominated	Men targeted	Men heavily targeted	Men dominant; gender norms strong
Organisation / Associations	Strong associations	Partial (EcoBarter-led)	Company-based, weak unions	None	Informal self-regulation only	Mixed; some association support
Public Perception & Stigma	High stigma	High stigma	Persistent stigma	Extreme stigma	Extreme stigma	High stigma
Aspirations	Expand within sector	Exit or upgrade	Exit to small business	Exit urgently	Exit with capital	Exit or become aggregator
Desired Government Role	Recognition & inclusion	Tools, capital, space	Better pay & labour protection	Protection, bins, recognition	Protection, ID, capital	Tools, capital, regular evacuation
Overall Vulnerability Level	Medium	High	Medium	Very high	Very high	Medium–high

Key Cross-Cutting Insights

- Vulnerability increases where organisation is weakest (CBN Karu, Kpegeyi).
- Women-dominated work is safer but underpaid and physically demanding.
- Mobility improves income potential but raises health and harassment risks.
- Semi-formal anchors (Chanja Datti, EcoBarter, Trash Monger) significantly improve stability.
- Across all sites, waste work is viewed as temporary, not a desired long-term occupation.

Summary Table: Key Themes from KII with Apo Pantaker Informal Waste Workers

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Insights from KIIs
Entry into Waste Work	Most workers entered due to economic hardship, job loss, migration, or displacement. Entry is informal and peer-driven.	Former carpenters, tailors, farmers, borehole drillers, and security guards transitioned into waste work through friends or mentors.
Nature of Work & Value Chain	Workers operate across collection, sorting, aggregation, and resale of recyclables.	PET, HDPE, LDPE, metals, cartons, rubber, and paper dominate. Aggregators link street pickers to recycling companies and exporters.
Income & Livelihoods	Earnings are low and unstable but support large households.	Daily income ranges from ₦2,500 – ₦7,000; many support 8–20 dependents, pay school fees, and send remittances to rural areas.
Working Conditions & Safety	Work is physically demanding and hazardous, with minimal PPE use.	Exposure to sharp objects, smoke, mixed waste; PPE access is irregular and often self-funded or NGO-supported.
Space & Infrastructure	Lack of designated sorting and storage spaces is a major constraint.	Workers operate on undeveloped land, face eviction, displacement, or destruction of sites by authorities.
Harassment & Stigma	Waste workers face criminalization, arrests, and negative public perception.	Frequently accused of theft or vandalism; restrictions on collection routes disrupt livelihoods.
Role of Associations	Associations provide protection, legitimacy, and advocacy.	Groups like WAPAN, Bola-Bola, and Scrap Dealers' Associations issue ID cards, mediate with government, and lift bans.
Government Support	Limited and inconsistent engagement from authorities.	Occasional training or PPE distribution by AEPB/NGOs, but no systematic inclusion or support framework.
Self-Regulation & Accountability	Associations actively vet and register members to curb misconduct.	Use of NIN, guarantors, registers, uniforms, and internal discipline to address theft allegations.
Aspirations & Future Vision	Strong desire to remain in the sector with better recognition.	Workers want formal recognition, access to space, financing, trucks, and fair integration without losing autonomy.

Summary Table: Key Themes from KII – Apo Primary–Kabusa Informal Waste Workers

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Insights
Entry into Waste Work	Entry driven by displacement, insecurity, youth unemployment, and lack of alternatives.	Many respondents fled banditry/insurgency or joined after school or failed trades; waste work seen as survival rather than choice.
Nature of Work	Predominantly street picking and truck-assisted collection.	Workers trek long distances or follow compactors to collect plastics, rubbers, cartons, paper, and metals.
Role of EcoBarter	EcoBarter acts as anchor buyer and organiser.	Provides weighing, pricing, limited PPE, medical reimbursement, and some income stability.
Waste Types Collected	Plastics dominate, followed by rubbers, cartons, paper, and metals.	PET bottles and plastics are the most available and marketable materials.
Income Levels	Earnings are highly variable and market-dependent.	Daily income ranges from ₦500 – ₦5,000; monthly income can reach ₦50,000 – ₦60,000 for active workers, but is unreliable.
Livelihood Security	Income often insufficient and unstable.	Many describe “good days and bad days,” with difficulty planning or saving long-term.
Health & Safety Risks	High exposure to injury, illness, and unsafe conditions.	Frequent cuts from sharp objects, lack of PPE, untreated injuries, and consumption of discarded food due to hunger.
Harassment & Criminalisation	Regular harassment by security agents and residents.	Workers are often accused of theft; bans and stoppages worsen poverty and insecurity.
Gender Dynamics	Men face more suspicion and harassment than women.	Women are often tolerated in estates, while men are more frequently stopped or accused.
Organisation & Associations	Mixed levels of organisation.	EcoBarter-linked workers receive some protection; independent pickers remain highly exposed and unsupported.
Public Perception & Stigma	Strong social stigma attached to waste work.	Workers are viewed as dirty, uneducated, or criminal, regardless of schooling or conduct.
Aspirations & Future Plans	Many see waste work as temporary.	Common goals include exiting into transport or trade, or upgrading into vendors or aggregators if capital is available.
Desired Support	Preference for practical support over formalisation.	Requests focus on capital, equipment, uniforms/IDs, land, and fair treatment—not bureaucracy.

Summary Table: Key Themes from KII – Gwagwalada Informal Waste Workers

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Insights from KIIs
Entry into Waste Work	Entry driven by loss of livelihood, widowhood, eviction, or economic shock.	Former tailors, traders, poultry farmers, and ice-block sellers joined after business collapse or loss of spouse.
Worker Profile	Predominantly women, many single mothers or widows.	Women support large households (up to 7 dependents) and rely solely on waste work income.
Nature of Work	Fixed-site sorting, processing, and machine operation.	Tasks include sorting PET bottles, removing labels, cleaning plastics, and operating recycling machines.
Work Structure	Semi-formal, company-based arrangement.	Workers report to Chanja Datti daily; waste is supplied by agents and workers.
Working Hours	Long, regular hours.	Typical workday runs from 8am to 6pm, often standing throughout the day.
Income Pattern	Monthly salary-based earnings.	Sorters earn ₦39,000 – ₦45,000/month; supervisors/operators earn ₦50,000 – ₦55,000/month.
Income Adequacy	Income is predictable but insufficient.	Many state salaries do not meet household needs despite long hours.
Health & Safety	Moderate protection but high physical strain.	PPE is commonly used; key risks include heat exposure, fatigue, body pain, and high blood pressure.
Training & Support	Some structured training and PPE provision.	Training received from NGOs, NESREA, Fire Service, and company management.
Gendered Burden	Strong double burden of work and care.	Women combine full-day labour with childcare and domestic responsibilities.
Public Perception & Stigma	Persistent social stigma.	Workers report being mocked or avoided due to the nature of their work, but continue out of necessity.
Organisation & Voice	Weak independent worker organisation.	Identity tied to company roles (“Quality Control”); limited collective bargaining or advocacy.
Harassment & Security	Minimal police harassment compared to street pickers.	Fixed-site work reduces exposure to security crackdowns.
Aspirations & Exit Plans	Strong desire to exit the sector.	Many hope to start small businesses, return to trading, or reduce physical labour with age.
Desired Improvements	Better pay, shelter, and worker protection.	Calls for salary increases, sheds for shade/rain, uniforms, and government support.

Summary Table: Key Themes from KII – CBN Karu Site (Informal Waste Collectors)

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Insights from KIIs
Entry into Waste Work	Entry driven by extreme poverty, unemployment, and lack of alternatives.	Workers joined by observing others at the dumpsite; no training or onboarding.
Worker Profile	Predominantly men with limited education and weak social protection.	Many migrated or were previously unemployed, traders, labourers, or okada riders.
Nature of Work	Dumpsite and street-based scavenging.	Early-morning collection from dumpsites, bins, drainage channels, and streets using sacks.
Waste Types Collected	Plastics dominate, followed by cartons, paper, rubber, and metals.	Plastics are prioritised due to availability and resale value.
Work Intensity	Long hours with high physical strain.	Workers start as early as 4–6am and walk long distances carrying heavy sacks.
Income Levels	Very low and unstable earnings.	Daily income ranges from ₦2,000 – ₦5,000; monthly income can fall below ₦15,000.
Income Adequacy	Earnings are insufficient for basic needs.	Respondents describe the work as “no longer productive” and unable to sustain families.
Health & Safety	Extremely poor health and safety conditions.	Frequent injuries, no PPE, self-medication, exposure to smoke, drains, and sharp objects.
Training & Support	No formal training or institutional support.	No government, NGO, or private sector engagement reported.
Organisation & Solidarity	No formal associations; weak informal support.	Occasional peer support during illness, but no IDs, representation, or bargaining power.
Harassment & Criminalisation	Severe and routine harassment by police and communities.	Workers are frequently arrested, extorted, and accused of theft.
Gender Dynamics	Men disproportionately targeted and criminalised.	Women are perceived as less suspicious and face less harassment.
Public Perception & Stigma	Strong negative social stigma.	Workers are labelled thieves, useless, or criminals, affecting dignity and wellbeing.
Aspirations & Exit Plans	Strong desire to exit waste picking.	Most hope to start farming, trading, or other vocations if support becomes available.
Desired Government Action	Focus on protection, not expansion of work.	Requests include waste bins, licences, recognition, and freedom from harassment.

Summary Table: Key Themes from KII – Kpegeyi Dumpsite (Informal Waste Collectors)

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Insights from KIIs
Entry into Waste Work	Early entry and long-term involvement, including child labour and migration.	Many began collecting waste as children (Primary 2–3); several have 10–15+ years in the sector after migrating from Kano and nearby states.
Worker Profile	Predominantly men with limited education and long tenure.	Workers rely solely on waste picking as their main livelihood and support extended families.
Nature of Work	Dumpsite-centred collection and on-site sorting.	Plastics, cartons, rubber, metals, tins, and cans are collected and manually sorted using bare hands, sacks, and wheelbarrows.
Work Intensity	Physically demanding, long working days.	Daily work often runs from morning to evening under the sun with minimal rest.
Income Levels	Low and unstable but slightly higher than other dumpsites.	Daily income averages ₦1,500 – ₦3,000; monthly income around ₦25,000 – ₦30,000 for consistent workers.
Income Adequacy	Insufficient for long-term security.	Earnings cover food and basic needs but do not allow savings or resilience against shocks.
Health & Safety	Severe, chronic health risks.	Frequent cuts, infections, untreated injuries, exposure to carcasses and decomposing waste; PPE use is rare due to cost.
Access to Healthcare	Reliance on self-treatment.	Injuries are treated with cloth bandages, paracetamol, or chemist visits; hospital care is uncommon.
Harassment & Criminalisation	Extreme and systemic.	Regular police raids, mass arrests, extortion, prolonged detention, and seizure of materials and food.
Gender Dynamics	Men are disproportionately targeted.	Men face assault and arrest; women are less suspected and can access spaces men cannot.
Organisation & Governance	No formal associations; informal self-regulation exists.	New entrants are vetted, theft is discouraged, but internal disputes often trigger external crackdowns.
Storage & Infrastructure	Severe infrastructure and space constraints.	Dumpsite is overcrowded, spills onto roads, and is rarely evacuated by authorities.
Public Perception & Stigma	Deep social stigma and psychological distress.	Workers are labelled thieves and criminals, causing anger, frustration, and fear of violence.
Aspirations & Exit Plans	Strong desire to exit waste picking.	Most want capital to start small businesses, drive vehicles, or become buyers instead of pickers.
Desired Government Action	Recognition and protection over repression.	Requests include ID cards, uniforms, protection from harassment, capital support, and better dumpsite management.

Summary Table: Key Themes from KII – Nyanyan–Karu (Informal Waste Collectors)

Theme	Key Findings	Illustrative Insights from KIIs
Entry into Waste Work	Entry driven by livelihood switching and survival needs.	Workers transitioned from shoemaking, farming, construction labour, shoe shining, trading, or unemployment after moving to Abuja.
Worker Profile	Predominantly adult men supporting themselves and extended families.	Many rely solely on waste work as their main source of income.
Nature of Work	Highly mobile, street- and dumpsite-based collection.	Daily movement across Nyanya, Mararaba, Karu, Jikwoyi, Abattoir, Area 1, City College, and nearby communities.
Waste Types Collected	Mixed recyclables with emphasis on availability and value.	Leather, cartons, plastic bottles, metals, and paper are most commonly collected.
Work Intensity	Long working hours and physical strain.	Typical workdays run from 6–8am to 5–7pm, often covering long distances on foot, wheelbarrow, or truck.
Income Levels	Variable with occasional higher earning days.	Daily income ranges from ₦2,000 – ₦5,000, sometimes up to ₦10,000; monthly income can reach ₦30,000 – ₦40,000.
Income Adequacy	Mixed perceptions of sufficiency.	Some say income meets basic needs; others report it is insufficient for family responsibilities.
Tools & Infrastructure	Basic tools with infrastructure gaps.	Sacks, gloves, boots, wheelbarrows, and few trucks; overcrowded dumpsites and irregular waste evacuation disrupt work.
Health & Safety	Partial safety awareness, limited protection.	Gloves, boots, and masks used by some; injuries and illness treated at chemists or through self-medication.
Harassment & Stigma	Strong social stigma and suspicion.	Workers are frequently seen as thieves, mad, or worthless, causing emotional distress and loss of dignity.
Organisation & Associations	Mixed levels of organisation.	Some belong to associations that intervene in police cases; others work independently without protection.
Gender Dynamics	Traditional gender norms influence perceptions.	Men feel pressure to earn; some believe waste work is inappropriate for women, though treatment is often similar.
Public Perception	Low respect for the occupation.	Respondents feel hurt or depressed by how society views their work, despite relying on it for survival.
Aspirations & Exit Plans	Waste work seen as temporary.	Most hope to start businesses, buy trucks, become aggregators, return to school, or join the military.
Desired Support	Practical support over control.	Requests focus on tools, capital, regular dumpsite clearing, recognition, and fair treatment.

