

Stories of Change

Waste pickers are part of the solution to solid waste management in Senegal

Waste pickers from the Bokk Diom organisation, working at Dakar's Mbeubeuss landfill – in Senegal's capital city –, continued to provide essential waste management services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to public health, reducing environmental harm, and mitigating greenhouse gases. As with many, their incomes were impacted by the pandemic, especially those of women. However, the greatest threat to their incomes and livelihoods is the transformation of the waste management system, a process which they are excluded from. Drawing on [research](#) carried out with Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) during the pandemic, Bokk Diom was able to advocate on behalf of waste pickers and obtain pledges of inclusion in solid waste management (SWM) from national authorities. Bokk Diom and WIEGO are continuing in their efforts to attain a just transition for waste pickers.



Bigué Cissé, a waste picker specialised in the recuperation of plastics, is a member of the Association of Waste Pickers of Mbeubeuss, Bokk Diom. She has been working at the Mbeubeuss landfill for over 15 years. Photo: © Marta Moreiras, commissioned by WIEGO.

The challenge

As part of its plan to develop a national SWM system under the project **Promotion of Integrated Waste Management and the Economy of Solid Waste (PROMOGED)**, the Government of Senegal has set out to restructure the Mbeubeuss dumpsite on the outskirts of Dakar. With an area of 114 hectares, Mbeubeuss is one of the largest open-air dumpsites in the world. It receives about 80 per cent of all waste produced in Senegal and provides income for over 2,000 informal waste pickers who pick out, clean, and re-sell material dumped there, particularly plastic. PROMOGED is supported by major international backers, including the World Bank, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), the French Development Agency (AFD), and the European Investment Bank (EIB). It seeks to modernise the infrastructure on the site through a public-private partnership. But how will informal waste pickers be included into SWM, and how will their livelihoods be protected?

The research

As part of a wider study looking at the **impacts of the pandemic on specific groups of informal sector workers**, WIEGO conducted a survey and in-depth interviews with members of Bokk Diom.

In addition to diminished earnings, the study found that waste pickers faced increased costs of working; for example, around buying their own personal protective equipment. Unsurprisingly, they also experienced increased debts and depleted savings, whilst almost none received any type of relief from the government.

/// I would like to reassure waste pickers working on the site... that their interests will be fully considered... by retraining them in the industry in compliance with hygiene, health, safety, and environmental standards. ///

Macky Sall, President of Senegal. Comments made at the launching of PROMOGED, 24 June 2021

The greatest impact on waste pickers' livelihoods, however, was caused by increased access restrictions to recyclables under PROMOGED, which diverts them from the dumpsite before arriving to Mbeubeuss. Changes to waste collection schedules particularly affected women waste pickers as most of the materials arrived at the dumpsite in the middle of the night, increasing risks to their safety.

Despite these impacts on their work, waste pickers have been excluded from decision-making spaces and they have not received any guarantees to secure **their livelihoods**.

The impact

WIEGO's research helped waste pickers articulate the role they play as essential workers contributing to Senegal's **mitigation of greenhouse gases**. Waste pickers also requested relief measures to cope with their immediate needs during the pandemic, and raised demands for a just transition that guarantees their livelihoods and includes them in the SWM system.

Moreover, WIEGO helped Bokk Diom strengthen its partnership with the Confédération Nationale des Travailleurs du Sénégal (CNTS), which created openings for engagement with local and national authorities.

As a result, at PROMOGED's launch in June 2021, President Macky Sall himself explicitly **reassured waste pickers that their livelihoods would be protected and that they would be included in the SWM system**. A year later, the head of PROMOGED pledged that waste pickers' working conditions would be improved. Representatives from Bokk Diom were then invited to participate in the Mixed Committee to oversee the measures to restructure Mbeubeuss, alongside representatives from PROMOGED and the Solid Waste Management Coordination Unit (UCG).

The visibility obtained through the research has helped bolster WIEGO's organisational strengthening work with Bokk Diom. It also helped alliance-building efforts in favour of the **formation of a cooperative** (with the International Labour Organization, ILO), and to seek recognition of their labour rights by becoming the first national union of waste pickers (with CNTS). Both of these developments are crucial as Bokk Diom works to position itself as a SWM service provider.

Finally, following WIEGO's capacity-building work with women to diversify their income and strengthen their communication skills, they now have enhanced participation in Bokk Diom's decision-making and increased leadership in engagements with other stakeholders.

Conclusion

This project has highlighted the importance of building awareness and organisational capacity amongst marginalised and excluded communities so they can both represent themselves in the face of more powerful actors and link to wider national support structures. Thanks to the research and the process of organisational strengthening, Mbeubeuss' waste pickers had actionable data to advance their claims-making strategies and build alliances to gain visibility, but there is still a long way to go.

Further reading

Diop, M. (2022) *Waste Pickers Organize Into a Cooperative: Will Senegal Include Them in its Waste Management Plan?*, WIEGO blog, 19 May (accessed 16 August 2023)

WIEGO (2022) *Covid-19 and Informal Work in 11 Cities: Recovery Pathways Amidst Continued Crisis*, WIEGO Working Paper 43, Manchester: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (accessed 16 August 2023)

WIEGO and Bokk Diom (2022) *La crise de la Covid-19 et l'économie informelle à Dakar, Sénégal : impacts durables et agenda de redressement* (accessed 16 August 2023)

Informal Workers and Covid-19: Evidence-Based Responses to the Crisis at the Base of the Economic Pyramid

Lead partner: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)

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About this report

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It was produced as part of the CORE KT Programme, which supports the translation of knowledge emerging from the CORE initiative. Supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), CORE brings together 20 projects to understand the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, improve existing responses, and generate better policy options for recovery.

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DOI: [10.19088/CORE.2023.012](https://doi.org/10.19088/CORE.2023.012)