

# JUST TRANSITION IN PLASTIC GOVERNANCE:

Guide for local and national decision-makers



## Executive summary

This brief provides practical guidance for authorities seeking to improve plastic regulation and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) implementation. Based on evidence from Mombasa, Kenya, it shows how governance arrangements that engage waste pickers can reduce plastic leakage, improve environmental and health outcomes, and strengthen the cost-effectiveness of public action, while improving waste pickers' livelihoods. The brief outlines institutional options for embedding participation in plastic governance and EPR systems.

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Members of Mwakirunge Waste Pickers Group sorting waste at Mwakirunge dumpsite.

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**Cover photo:** Members of Saidia People with Epilepsy working at their waste collection point.

**Photo credit (all photos):** CEJAD

## Introduction

Plastic pollution is a growing governance challenge for local and national governments, particularly in cities where formal waste systems do not reach all communities. In response, many countries are introducing plastic bans, circular economy strategies, and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks. Research shows, however, that these instruments are less effective when they are designed and implemented without the involvement of actors who manage plastic waste in practice. Combining environmental policy effectiveness with the respect for human rights and labour rights is now discussed under the concept of a **just transition**: environmental policies should reduce pollution while also protecting health outcomes and being fair to workers and communities affected<sup>1</sup>.

Waste pickers are central to this issue. In many low- and middle-income cities, waste pickers recover a significant share of recyclable plastics, particularly in informal settlements and areas not covered by formal waste services<sup>2</sup>. Despite this, waste governance and plastic regulation often favour larger, formal firms and technical planning models, which can marginalize waste pickers and weaken existing collection systems. Evidence from Africa and Latin America shows that such exclusion can increase plastic leakage into nature, raise system costs, and create resistance to implementing government policy, while more inclusive approaches tend to improve recovery rates, compliance, and legitimacy of policy decisions<sup>3</sup>.

*Only 9% of plastic has ever been recycled (Houssini et al 2025), mostly by informal workers who collect around 60% of the world's recycled plastic (Lau et al 2020).*

At the same time, studies show that formal consultation alone does not guarantee influence. When agendas, information, knowledge, and decisions remain controlled by authorities, participation can reproduce existing power imbalances and exclude practical, experience-based knowledge<sup>4</sup>.

This policy brief draws on empirical research from Mombasa County, Kenya, using participatory action research, democracy labs, and co-created knowledge tools to advise on how participation can improve plastic governance outcomes. The recommendations speak directly to local governments and national agencies seeking to implement plastic regulation and EPR frameworks that are both effective and socially sustainable.

<sup>1</sup> Dauvergne 2023; Velis 2022, 2024; O'Hare & Nøklebye 2024

<sup>2</sup> Wilson et al. 2012; Kain et al. 2022; Zapata Campos et al. 2023

<sup>3</sup> Dias & Fernández 2020; Gutberlet 2021; Rosaldo 2018

<sup>4</sup> Gaventa 2006; Cornwall & Coelho 2007; Fricker 2007; Jasanoff 2004

## Methodology

The study, fielded between March and October 2024, combined qualitative methods including policy and regulatory review, focus group discussions with waste picker organizations, key informant interviews with county and national officials, participatory video documentation, plastic brand audits, and four co-created democracy labs involving grassroots actors, civil society, and government agencies. Data were analysed inductively to examine how different forms of participation influence plastic governance outcomes and implementation in practice. While this brief condenses the implications for a governance audience, we refer to the research report for more evidence and analysis. The following section outlines the main recommendations.



Members of Mwakirunge Waste Pickers Group recovering recyclable waste at the Mwakirunge dumpsite, Mombasa.

# Policy recommendations

## 1. Institutionalize co-created participation platforms within waste governance systems

The evidence from Mombasa indicates that conventional “invited” participation mechanisms – public hearings, consultations, ad hoc dialogues – rarely shift policy outcomes or transform implementation practices in plastic governance. They tend to satisfy procedural requirements without redistributing decision-making power or integrating frontline knowledge. By contrast, in co-created platforms, different stakeholders jointly define the goals, rules, and agenda. An example in Mombasa is democracy labs, which enabled joint agenda-setting, mutual accountability, and concrete administrative changes, including adjustments to waste collection schedules, suspension of exclusionary privatization plans, and formal inclusion of waste pickers in technical committees.

**Co-created spaces:** Sites of intentional collaboration where diverse actors integrate their knowledge and experiences to generate governance solutions that could not be developed independently.

From a governance perspective, these platforms function not as consultative add-ons but as problem-solving institutions that surface operational bottlenecks that might be invisible to centralized planning. With the help of the research team as facilitators, waste pickers’ situated knowledge on access constraints, collection logistics, material flows, and behavioural incentives at household level proved directly relevant to policy effectiveness.

### What this means in practice

Local governments should formally anchor co-created platforms within existing waste governance architectures (e.g. departments of environment, solid waste management boards, climate committees), with:

- Clear mandates tied to plastic pollution reduction, service delivery improvement, and regulatory design.
- Defined roles for grassroots organizations (not just observer status).
- Administrative pathways linking discussion outputs to planning, budgeting, and enforcement units.
- This approach does not require creating parallel institutions, but ensuring that deliberation occurs before decisions are made.

**Risks if ignored**

Without institutionalization, co-created spaces remain dependent on individual champions, donor cycles, or research projects. Once facilitation or funding ends, gains risk being reversed, reinforcing scepticism among grassroots actors and weakening long-term compliance and cooperation.

## 2. Systematically include waste picker organizations in EPR and plastic regulation frameworks

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes and plastic regulations are increasingly central to national plastic waste strategies. However, when designed without waste pickers, they risk undermining existing recovery systems that already deliver high material recovery rates at minimal public cost. Indeed, international and comparative research finds that EPR systems that bypass informal recyclers often increase material leakage, raise system costs, and provoke social conflict, while inclusive models improve both recovery, traceability, and legitimacy. In this study, evidence from Kenya showed that waste pickers recover a significant share of recyclable plastics nationally, yet remain structurally excluded from EPR design, governance, and benefit flows<sup>5</sup>.

**What this means in practice**

Regulation compliance that is co-produced (rather than imposed) strengthens EPR performance without high costs of enforcement. National and local authorities should treat waste picker organizations as system actors, not beneficiaries, by:

- Including registered waste picker organizations in EPR governance bodies and technical working groups.
- Designing EPR obligations that recognize and remunerate collection, sorting, and pre-processing services already performed by grassroots actors.
- Aligning licensing, compliance, and reporting requirements with the operational realities of informal and semi-formal recycling systems.

**Risks if ignored**

Excluding waste pickers from EPR design risks formalizing parallel systems that compete for materials, displace livelihoods, and weaken collection rates in low-income and hard-to-reach areas – precisely where plastic leakage is highest and health outcomes severe.

<sup>5</sup> Read more about this in ICLD Policy Brief 35 *Brand Audits: A tool for local governments to foster a just and plastic-free transition*

### 3. Secure long-term funding and logistical support for iterative participatory processes

The research showed that meaningful participation in plastic governance is an iterative process of learning, unlearning, and institutional adaptation. Democracy labs and participatory video processes generated results because they were repeated, facilitated, and followed up over time. One-off events were insufficient to sustain trust or policy uptake.

From an administrative standpoint, this challenges the assumption that participation is a low-cost add-on. In reality, ineffective participation is costly: it can lead to policy resistance, weak implementation, and repeated reform cycles.

#### What this means in practice

Local and national governments should:

- Allocate predictable budget lines for participatory governance within waste and environmental programmes.
- Cover basic logistical costs (transport, facilitation, translation, documentation) that otherwise exclude frontline actors.
- Treat participatory platforms as part of core service delivery infrastructure, not as discretionary outreach activities.

This investment is modest relative to the costs of failed enforcement, environmental cleanup, and social conflict.

#### Risks if ignored

Under-resourced participation leads to fatigue among both officials and communities. The report shows that when engagement stalls, relationships deteriorate and informal accountability mechanisms (e.g. public shaming via social media) replace cooperative governance.

## 4. Monitor and evaluate how grassroots innovations shape policy outcomes over time

Grassroots innovations (decentralized sorting systems, material reuse practices, and community-based collection models, etc.) are already influencing plastic governance outcomes, but their impacts remain largely undocumented in formal monitoring systems. The study shows that when these innovations were made visible through co-created processes, they directly informed policy adjustments and administrative decisions.

Without systematic monitoring, governments risk undervaluing effective low-cost solutions while over-investing in capital-intensive infrastructure that underperforms in informal urban contexts.

### What this means in practice

Governments should integrate qualitative and mixed-method monitoring approaches that:

- Track how grassroots practices influence collection rates, leakage reduction, and service coverage.
- Identify regulatory or administrative barriers preventing successful innovations from scaling.
- Feed learning back into policy revision cycles in addition to end-of-project reporting.

### Risks if ignored

This requires modest analytical capacity but yields high returns in adaptive governance. Failure to monitor grassroots contributions perpetuates epistemic blind spots, reinforcing policies that are technically sound on paper but ineffective in practice.

## Concluding note for decision-makers

For governments working to reduce plastic pollution, the core lesson from this research is highly pragmatic: **plastic governance works better when those who manage plastic daily help design the rules.** Waste pickers' operational knowledge proves directly relevant to policy performance. Co-created dialogue spaces reduce friction, improve service delivery, and enhance environmental and health outcomes. Therefore, effective plastic regulation and EPR require participation to be treated as a governance function – thoughtfully designed, resourced, and institutionally anchored.



Francis Mtawale of Safisha Timbwani Yetu Volunteers Group collecting waste from households

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