Call for inputs for the study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on the implications of plastic pollution for the full enjoyment of human rights

DEADLINE 15 May 2026

The Fair Circularity Initiative (FCI) is a multi-company initiative that brings businesses together around the aim of ensuring that the human rights of workers within the informal waste sector are respected and that their critical role in circular value chains is recognized. FCI's approach is grounded in the Fair Circularity Principles, which apply the expectations and responsibilities of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to the informal waste sector (Shift, 2022).

Core questions for all

1. **Please explain in what ways plastics affect human rights. What are the human rights impacts that you associate with the different phases of the full life-cycle of plastics (e.g., during extraction of raw materials; during production of primary plastic precursors, design and production of plastic products; during packaging and distribution; during use and maintenance; and during recycling, reuse, recovery or final disposal)? Where possible, please provide concrete data, studies, etc.**

The Fair Circularity Initiative (FCI) focuses primarily on the downstream stages of the plastics lifecycle – waste collection, sorting, recycling, and recovery – where plastics systems have direct and significant human rights implications for waste pickers. Waste pickers are informal workers who collect, sort and sell recyclable or reusable materials. Globally, they are estimated to recover close to 60% of recycled post-consumer plastic waste, and estimates of the number of waste pickers or informal waste workers globally range from roughly 20 million to 40 million, depending on definitions and methodology (O'Hare & Nøklebye, 2024; UNEP, 2025; The Circulate Initiative, 2025). These workers provide critical environmental and public health services, reducing pollution and supporting circularity, but despite their crucial contribution they are vulnerable to a broad range of severe human rights impacts. Research by the FCI shows that waste pickers can experience human rights impacts including:

- An Inadequate Standard of Living: Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their families, including adequate food and nutrition, clothing, housing and access to medical care when necessary. Evidence from FCI's Living Income studies shows that waste pickers typically earn only 20–60% of a living income and often below minimum wage, with direct implications for food security and housing conditions



(Living Income Phase 2 Case Studies, 2024). For waste pickers, there are various factors that can affect their enjoyment of this right.

  - Inadequate Income: Far from the metric of a 'living income', most waste pickers live well below the poverty line in their home countries. They are paid for their materials, but not for their labor or the public service they provide by collecting waste
  - Lack of Bargaining Power in Price Setting: Prices for recycled material are, in most cases, set by the aggregators who buy recycled material from waste pickers. Waste pickers often lack bargaining power in setting a fair price, due in many instances to their dependence on aggregators for market access (particularly where aggregators are the only source of transportation of materials).
  - Income Instability: The lack of bargaining power, the absence of fixed contracts in the informal sector, and the influence of broader market factors that affect demand (such as the price of crude oil), translates into a lack of any income predictability or stability for waste pickers.
  - Income Insecurity: In addition to these factors, waste pickers are concerned about, and in some cases report having suffered, loss of livelihoods due to market exclusion in the face of waste sector privatization, EPR schemes that have not included the informal waste sector, and exclusion from public and private procurement supply chains.

  - Income inadequacy, instability and insecurity – coupled with exclusion from social and financial services highlighted below – have the further impact of creating barriers for waste pickers to earn higher incomes by 'moving up' the value chain. Waste pickers often lack access to the financial resources, machinery, training, transportation and land needed to store and aggregate their recyclables.

- Lack of Respect for Freedom of Association / Collective Bargaining: Not all waste pickers seek formalization of their business activities, in the form of cooperatives, associations or trade unions. However, when they do, they may face barriers to organizing themselves into collective enterprises, including the financial resources required to organize. The ability to organize is often understood as an enabling right, which, if addressed, should help to prevent and address other human rights impacts.
- Lack of Recognition and Social Stigma: Waste pickers perceive the social stigma connected to their work. They are often perceived as 'lesser' members of society, and are frequently either ignored or mistreated by others – discriminatory conduct which is perceived as acceptable and normal in many societies. This loss of basic human dignity is fundamentally what human rights harms are about, and it is both a cause and effect of impacts related to livelihoods, health and safety and other working conditions. It can also affect waste pickers' access to recyclable materials.
- Marginalization / Discrimination / Lack of Inclusion: Underlying the protection of many human rights is the idea that people should be consulted and included in the decisions that affect their lives. Waste pickers are marginalized in society and often not recognized as legitimate and relevant stakeholders. They are rarely consulted in the policy-making processes that shape the waste collection sector, nor in the design or implementation of company programs or actions to address impacts they might face.
- Exclusion from Social and Financial Services: Due to the informal nature of the sector, waste pickers are often excluded from the social safety net, including social security and health care.



Workers in informal sectors, including waste pickers, often lack access to formal banking systems, and in some cases even identity cards. The lack of financial inclusion serves as a further barrier to stable and secure income, as more formal parts of the economy are often not equipped to engage with the informal sector.

- Child Labor and Child Accompaniment: In certain contexts, child labor is a feature of the informal waste sector. Although not all child work constitutes prohibited child labor, where children are present in this sector they are often engaged in hazardous work and/or are unable to access education as a result. Children may accompany their parents to work because this is deemed safer than leaving them at home, or because they lack access to affordable and convenient childcare. Even where children are not working, they may still be at risk when accompanying parent or guardian reclaimers, with impacts on their safety and/or education.
- Impacts on Workplace Health and Safety: Poor health and safety conditions while collecting waste frequently results in injuries, and even in some cases, fatalities for waste pickers. At landfills, waste pickers work in hazardous conditions, are exposed to potentially hazardous materials and toxic fumes, lack personal protective equipment (PPE), and are at risk of severe injury from heavy machinery and vehicles. In other contexts, the personal safety and security of waste pickers – particularly women – is at risk, especially when collection takes place at night.
- Impacts on Other Conditions of Decent Work: Waste pickers work excessively long hours, often seven days a week without rest, lacking access to bathrooms and basic sanitation, which may again disproportionately impact women.

These impacts contribute to the restriction of waste pickers' enjoyment of:

a. Right to just and favorable conditions of work (ICESCR art. 7; UDHR art. 23)

b. Right to health and safe working conditions (ICESCR arts. 7(b), 12; UDHR art. 25)

c. Right to an adequate standard of living (ICESCR art. 11(1); UDHR art. 25(1))

d. Right to non-discrimination and equality (ICESCR art. 2(2); ICCPR art. 26; UDHR arts. 2, 7)

e. Freedom of association and participation in decision-making (ICCPR arts. 22, 25; ICESCR art. 8; UDHR arts. 20, 21, 23(4))

2. In your case, what are the main challenges slowing the progress in combating plastic pollution? List and describe them briefly.

A key challenge for both human rights and meaningful progress on plastic pollution is that the waste pickers who already underpin plastics recovery are still too often excluded from system design, policymaking processes, and investment decisions. Their integration is crucial because, in many contexts, they provide the only effective form of collection for low-value or dispersed waste streams and are often able to reach areas that formal systems do not. Existing waste picker systems are highly adaptive to local waste flows and generate significant public benefits, including increased collection and reduced leakage into the environment. Efforts to combat plastic pollution are therefore less effective when they fail to recognize, strengthen, and build on these existing systems.



Responses to plastic pollution often prioritize targets, commitments, or formal system design without sufficient attention to implementation realities. Progress is slowed by weak coordination, underinvestment in collection, and reforms that do not adequately account for how waste is actually collected, sorted, and moved in practice. Where policy and projects fail to build on functioning local systems and the actors already driving recovery, collection rates and environmental outcomes are likely to fall short.

3. **What measures (legislative, administrative, institutional, or other), if any, exist to address plastics and plastic pollution? Have human rights implications been taken into account in their adoption and implementation? Are there good practices or lessons learned in regulating plastics and plastic pollution that include a human rights-based approach?**

FCI has applied the expectations and responsibilities of the UNGPs to the informal waste sector through the Fair Circularity Principles (Shift, 2022). Leading global multi-national corporations have committed to adopt and advance these principles through using their leverage to impact supply chains and public policy to uphold waste picker rights and livelihoods.

One key policy instrument through which the Fair Circularity Principles can be applied to waste picker rights is Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), the use of which is expanding globally and has significant potential to address plastic pollution. EPR schemes require manufacturers to take responsibility for the end-of-life management of their products and packaging. Consideration of human rights impacts in the implementation of EPR systems are only emerging, but the FCI views that these policy instruments hold great potential in:

- Formal recognition of waste pickers' roles (Principles 1 and 9; Shift, 2022)
- Integration of waste pickers into EPR supported/organized collection and recycling systems (Principles 8 and 9; Shift, 2022)
- Fair and transparent compensation mechanisms for collected materials and the service provided (Principles 2 and 10; Shift, 2022)
- Participation of waste pickers in governance and decision-making of EPR systems (Principles 5 and 8; Shift, 2022)

4. **What gaps or challenges in existing national, regional and international policies and legal frameworks have you observed? What recommendations do you have in order to address the gaps? Please, list them according to priority.**

Because FCI works collectively across many geographies, we do not point to a single national framework. Across geographies, however, we see common gaps.

First, policy frameworks often focus on material recovery without equivalent attention to human rights conditions. We recommend that plastics-related policy and implementation be aligned with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, including through due diligence, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and attention to remedy.



Second, many policy frameworks related to waste management still do not sufficiently recognize informal waste workers as legitimate actors and key stakeholders in plastics value chains. Our primary recommendation is that policies, including EPR frameworks, should explicitly require the inclusion of waste pickers and other informal waste workers in design, implementation, and monitoring.

Third, there is still insufficient investment in the enabling conditions that make rights-respecting implementation possible. In many contexts, this includes lack of formal recognition of waste pickers, limited access to public services and social protection, legal barriers to accessing waste or entering contracts, and weak support for the systems and end-markets needed to make inclusive collection and recycling viable. It also includes insufficient attention to the payment structures that underpin decent livelihoods, including service fees and fair compensation for both collection services and the value of materials recovered. Addressing these gaps is essential to building waste and recycling systems that are both effective and rights-respecting.

5. **What are the particular impacts of plastics and plastic pollution on human rights of individuals, groups and peoples in vulnerable situations (e.g., marginalized communities, workers at heightened risk of occupational exposure, in particular waste pickers/reclaimers, peasants, people living in poverty, low-income households, children, youth, women, persons with disabilities, people of African descent, older persons, Indigenous Peoples, coastal communities), and how should these be mitigated, remediated and prevented?**

The group FCI knows best in this context is waste pickers and other informal waste workers, who play a critical role in plastics recovery while often facing severe and overlapping human rights impacts. These include inadequate, unstable or insecure incomes and broader impacts on an adequate standard of living; unsafe and unhealthy working conditions; lack of respect for freedom of association or collective bargaining; lack of recognition and social stigma; marginalization, discrimination and exclusion; exclusion from social and financial services; and, in some contexts, child labor and child accompaniment (FCI Policy Action Guidance, Annex A). These impacts are often intensified by the informal nature of the work and by the fact that waste pickers are frequently excluded from decisions that shape waste management and recycling systems.

FCI also emphasizes the importance of applying a gender lens. Women waste pickers often face distinct and heightened risks, including risks to personal safety, unequal access to economic opportunities and resources, and other gender-specific barriers that affect their ability to participate on equal terms in waste and recycling value chains (FCI Policy Action Guidance, Annex C).

In our view, these harms should be mitigated, remediated and prevented through a rights-respecting approach to waste and recycling systems. In practice, this means recognizing waste pickers as workers and legitimate stakeholders in the value chain; engaging meaningfully with waste picker organizations; ensuring their inclusion in policy-making and implementation processes that affect their livelihoods; improving occupational health and safety and access to social protection and public services; addressing barriers to decent livelihoods, including low and unstable incomes; and designing locally appropriate measures that strengthen rather than displace existing waste picker systems (FCI Policy Action Guidance, Section 1; Annex B).



6. **To what extent does the expansion of fossil fuel extraction and petrochemical production contribute to plastic pollution? How do subsidies, tax incentives, or public financing for fossil fuel or petrochemical industries affect States' ability to meet their human rights obligations in the context of plastic pollution?**

This is outside of FCI's area of expertise. FCI's contribution is focused on the downstream stages of plastics value chains, particularly collection, sorting, recycling, recovery, and the human rights of waste pickers and other informal waste workers.

7. **What are the measures to protect human rights in the transition to sustainable economies and societies and what lessons could be learnt from other sectors in this regard? Are there alternatives to or substitutes of plastics? What are their social and human rights implications?**

In FCI's view, a just transition in the plastics context must recognize the informal workers whose labor currently underpins collection, sorting, and recycling. Across geographies, we promote approaches that protect livelihoods, strengthen recognition and participation, and avoid shifting the social costs of transition onto already vulnerable workers. That includes meaningful engagement with waste pickers, locally tailored implementation, and integration of informal workers into formal value chains where this improves rights protection.

On alternatives or substitutes to plastics, this is outside of FCI's area of expertise.

8. **What are the particular impacts of plastics and plastic pollution on Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs), and how should these be mitigated, remediated and prevented?**

This is outside of FCI's area of expertise. FCI's contribution is focused on the downstream stages of plastics value chains, particularly collection, sorting, recycling, recovery, and the human rights of waste pickers and other informal waste workers.

9. **What strategies or initiatives (local, national, regional, or international) are most effective in raising awareness about human rights implications of plastics across its lifecycle, reaching out to all relevant stakeholders and rights-holders, including consumers and societies at large?**

FCI's experience is that awareness raising is most effective when it is grounded in the realities of waste and recycling value chains and informed by direct engagement with affected workers, particularly informal waste workers. Principle 5 of the Fair Circularity Principles directs companies to engage meaningfully with informal waste sector workers. In the context of awareness-raising, this matters because strategies are more credible and effective when they are informed by the perspectives, priorities, and lived experience of the workers most affected by plastics recovery systems. Research, policy guidance, stakeholder dialogue, and public narratives are all important tools – but they are most impactful when they make visible both the essential role of waste pickers in plastics recovery systems and the human rights risks they face.

Collective action by the private sector grounded in rightsholder engagement has great potential for awareness raising on this issue. Through collaborative initiatives such as FCI, businesses are able to



aggregate influence and align messaging, enabling them to engage more effectively with governments, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

In this context, the private sector can play several key roles:

- Using collective leverage to influence policy and public narrative:
  When companies speak with a coordinated voice, they can call attention to the human rights impacts faced by waste pickers in plastics policy discussions – particularly in areas such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), waste management reform, and just transition frameworks.

- Translating technical issues into policy-relevant insights:
  Businesses operating across plastics value chains are uniquely positioned to connect upstream decisions (e.g., product design, sourcing) with downstream realities (e.g., informal waste collection), centering rightsholder perspectives to help policymakers better understand system-wide human rights implications.

- Supporting evidence generation and dissemination:
  Private sector actors can fund and co-develop research, use evidence gathered through human rights due diligence processes, and develop case studies that bring visibility to human rights impacts – especially when developed in partnership with waste picker organizations and local stakeholders. These efforts can drive global best practices across waste management, waste picker integration, and plastics/packaging policy.

- Convening multi-stakeholder dialogue:
  Collaborative initiatives can create platforms where governments, civil society, and worker representatives engage directly, ensuring that awareness-building is linked to practical policy and implementation outcomes.

10. What specific barriers in business conduct hinder efforts to end plastic pollution and reduce plastic production? Are there any examples on how these barriers have been addressed or overcome? What (human rights-based) minimum standards should States impose on plastic producers to hold them responsible for the entire lifecycle of their products?

FCI's contribution in this area is focused on the human rights dimensions of waste and recycling value chains, and on supporting a just transition in which waste pickers' rights, livelihoods, and knowledge are reflected in efforts to address plastic pollution. Where business models, sourcing approaches, or policy engagement overlook the people already collecting, sorting, and recovering materials, they can weaken collection systems, undermine livelihoods, and limit the effectiveness of efforts to reduce plastic leakage and improve circularity.

A second barrier is fragmented and insufficiently coordinated action. Individual company initiatives can be valuable, but they often do not address the structural conditions that shape outcomes for waste pickers, including exclusion from policymaking, weak access to services and protections, and low or unstable incomes. Progress is stronger where companies act collectively, engage directly with waste



picker organizations, and use their leverage to support more inclusive policy and system design. In FCI's experience, efforts to integrate waste pickers into EPR and recycling systems, support their participation in policy processes, and promote more consistent approaches to rights-respecting business conduct are important ways to address these barriers.

Across geographies, FCI would support minimum standards for value chain actors to recognize waste pickers' role in plastics recovery systems; engage meaningfully with waste pickers and their representative organizations; support their inclusion in EPR design, governance, and implementation; address human rights risks linked to their operations and value chains; and avoid approaches that displace informal workers without protecting livelihoods or providing pathways to decent work. In our view, minimum standards should help ensure that efforts to address plastic pollution are implemented in ways that are inclusive, locally grounded, and consistent with a just transition.

11. **How should the State regulate chemicals used in plastics, including additives to protect the rights to health and a clean, healthy and sustainable environment? Do States apply the precautionary principle or approach to plastic associated chemicals? If not, what legal or institutional barriers prevent the application of this principle?**

This is outside of FCI's area of expertise. FCI's contribution is focused on the downstream stages of plastics value chains, particularly collection, sorting, recycling, recovery, and the human rights of waste pickers and other informal waste workers.

12. **What is the national framework to ensure access to information on plastics-related risks and harms, including identified hazards and contamination (e.g., across the plastics lifecycle and related health and environmental impacts)?**

Because FCI works across many geographies, we do not identify a single national framework in response to this question. Across contexts, we would generally support frameworks that ensure workers and affected communities can access clear and practical information on plastics and collection related risks and harms, including identified hazards, contamination, occupational health and safety risks, and relevant environmental and health impacts. For waste pickers and other informal waste workers, this information must be accessible in practice, not only formally available, and should help enable prevention of harm, safer conditions of work, and more effective responses where risks are identified.

13. **Where litigation or formal complaints are necessary, what measures does the State provide to facilitate effective and prompt access to justice and remedies for individuals and communities, including clear standing rules, legal aid or other support, and protection against retaliation?**

Because FCI works across geographies, we do not identify a single national justice framework. More generally, we consider access to remedy to be an important part of a rights-respecting approach to plastics value chains. In the part of the lifecycle where FCI works, remedy should be accessible to affected workers and responsive to the realities of informal work. Beyond that general point, we would not want to go further without country-specific analysis.

14. **Are you aware of any reprisals that individuals and civil society, including scientists and human rights defenders, face for their work regarding plastics and plastic pollution?**



This is outside of FCI's area of expertise. FCI's contribution is focused on the downstream stages of plastics value chains, particularly collection, sorting, recycling, recovery, and the human rights of waste pickers and other informal waste workers.

Questions for private sector

1. **Please describe relevant measures that your company has introduced to prevent impacts of plastic pollution on human rights? What are the key accomplishments? What challenges has your company faced? Are you aware of and using the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights?**

Because FCI is a collaborative initiative rather than a single operating company, we respond to this question at the level of the initiative and its participating companies collectively.

FCI's central measure has been to develop and advance the Fair Circularity Principles, which apply the expectations of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to the informal waste sector in plastics waste and recycling value chains (Shift, 2022; FCI Progress Report, 2024). Through FCI, participating companies have committed to advancing and adopting these principles in collaboration with waste picker organizations, reporting on progress, and engaging in collective action on policy, implementation, and capability building (FCI Progress Report, 2024).

This work is grounded in the recognition that waste pickers often face severe human rights impacts, and that companies in plastics packaging recycling value chains should presume, at a minimum, that they may be linked to those impacts through their operations, products, or business relationships (FCI Policy Action Guidance, Annex A). In line with the UNGPs, this means using leverage to help prevent and mitigate harm, including through engagement with value chain actors, governments, and waste picker representatives.

Key accomplishments to date include establishing a common rights-based framework for corporate engagement with the informal waste sector, raising the visibility of these issues in policy and public discussions, and supporting work on responsible sourcing, living income, worker integration, and local implementation (FCI Progress Report, 2024). The main challenge remains translating shared commitments into consistent, locally grounded practice across fragmented value chains and uneven policy contexts.

2. **Has your company adopted a human rights due diligence policy that addresses the potential adverse impacts of plastics and plastic pollution? Describe it please, highlighting the human rights component.**

FCI is not itself a company and therefore does not adopt a company policy. However, it has developed and promoted the Fair Circularity Principles as a shared framework for participating companies. Those principles apply the expectations and responsibilities outlined in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to the informal waste sector and are intended to guide companies in preventing and



addressing human rights impacts in line with the nature of their involvement. Respect for human rights is therefore the central concept of the Fair Circularity Principles, which cover recognition of the critical role of informal waste sector workers, meaningful engagement with those workers, freedom of association, working conditions, gender impacts, inclusion in policy-making processes, and efforts to promote greater integration into formal value chains where this improves rights protection.

3. **What systems of accountability and reporting have you established/consider establishing for addressing adverse impacts of plastics on human rights within your company?**

At the initiative level, FCI members commit to report on progress regarding advancing the Fair Circularity Principles in their value chains in collaboration with waste picker organizations and a practice of aggregated reporting across member companies. The initiative also places emphasis on transparent reporting, robust consultation with stakeholders, and ongoing member engagement with informal workers.

FCI cannot provide insight on company-specific grievance mechanisms, internal controls, or disclosure systems.

4. **What measures could be introduced to bridge information gaps on impacts of plastic pollution?**

In FCI's experience, the most important measure is to generate evidence with, not only about, affected workers. Information gaps are often not simply technical; they arise because waste pickers and other informal workers are not adequately included in research, policy design, or implementation review.

Measures that would help include more localized assessments of human rights impacts in waste and recycling value chains; stronger worker engagement; practical guidance for companies; more consistent reporting on progress; and collaborative efforts to identify and address barriers to rights-respecting practice in specific contexts. These are all reflected in FCI's strategy and methods.

5. **What legal, commercial and technical barriers prevent companies from making full disclosure of chemical composition of plastic products? Can you indicate what forms of public support the State could provide to most effectively subsidize a transition from plastic-based raw materials to sustainable, non-hazardous alternatives that minimize risks to human health and the environment, including measures that would enable industry to substitute inputs and redesign products accordingly?**

This is outside of FCI's area of expertise. FCI's contribution is focused on the downstream stages of plastics value chains, particularly collection, sorting, recycling, recovery, and the human rights of waste pickers and other informal waste workers.



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