

# Advancing Solutions to **Plastic Pollution** Through Inclusive Recycling





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# Executive Summary

Informal sector waste collectors (ISWCs) – sometimes called waste pickers or recyclers, among other terms – spend all or part of their workdays out in the community collecting items considered waste that can be recycled, to resell for (an often small) income. Globally, it is estimated that there are 15-20 million informal waste collectors, primarily in low-to-middle-income economies where there would be no recycling at all without their contributions. If items are not recycled or reused, they may be landfilled, burned, or leaked into the environment.

Not only are ISWCs providing a valuable public service, but they are also helping to protect our ocean. Ocean Conservancy first highlighted the importance of ISWCs in its 2019 report *The Role of Gender in Waste Management*. In its *Plastics Policy Playbook*, also published in 2019, Ocean Conservancy and its Trash Free Seas Alliance® partners called for inclusion of the informal sector as a prerequisite for success of any plastic waste management policy in countries where they have a significant presence.

A 2020 scoping report commissioned by Ocean Conservancy, *Exploring Solutions to Ocean Plastics: Supporting Southeast Asia's Informal Waste Sector*, identified actions that could both support the ISWCs – the people – and increase collection of plastics most likely to end up in the ocean.

The scoping report led to the project: “Advancing Solutions to Plastic Pollution through Inclusive Recycling,” or ASPPIRe, and it has three broad goals:

- 1 Improve the well-being of the individual collectors;
- 2 Find end markets for low-value plastics (plastic likely to end up in the ocean and not currently being collected); and
- 3 Share learnings with policy makers in both countries, specifically in consideration of the informal sector within developing EPR systems.

Ocean Conservancy prioritizes policies to reduce and eventually eliminate the production of low-value and single-use plastics (often those that cannot be economically recycled or reused). Some companies and organizations are voluntarily innovating and advocating for more circular and zero-waste systems in their local communities; however, as these systems become proven and can be scaled, they will need public sector support.

While it's critical to prioritize policies that reduce single-use plastics and reintroduce reuse and refill systems, the ASPPIRe project was created to address immediate needs for collection and support for the informal sector. Two geographies were identified where a project could be implemented to support ISWCs. Colombia and Vietnam were selected because of their very different waste management systems, so a model could be tested in different contexts, and because both countries were exploring or implementing extended producer responsibility (EPR)

policies. EPR policies generally focus on financing the collection of waste and recyclables, which could benefit informal sector waste collectors IF they are included in the process. Another important factor in the selection process was whether there were potential in-country partners that had the connections to the informal waste sector, as well as the willingness to lead this work and advise on how best to adapt the ideas to their localities.

In-country partners were identified: Compromiso Empresarial para el Reciclaje (CEMPRE Colombia) and Center for Environment and Community Research (CECR) in Vietnam, as well as a global coordinating partner: Inclusive Waste Recycling Consortium (iWrc).

ASPPIRe's public activities kicked off in early 2021 with a virtual launch at the World Circular Economy Forum+ Climate. CEMPRE in Colombia and CECR in Vietnam were critical to the project as both had already developed deep connections to the informal sector in their respective geographies. In Colombia, ISWCs are called "recyclers" and there are cooperatives that provide some organizational structure. In Vietnam, there are no cooperatives and the ISWCs are largely independent, and mostly women. CEMPRE and CECR mapped their local waste management systems and the role of the informal sector prior to developing pilot projects. CEMPRE implemented the project in Cartagena and Buenaventura, Colombia; CECR implemented the ASPPIRe project in the Nam Tu Liem district of Hanoi, Vietnam.

In addition to finding end markets for low-value plastics that would boost ISWCs' incomes, the pilots implemented the Social Fingerprint methodology. This methodology assesses individuals and/or cooperatives in categories such as child labor, health and safety, remuneration, work hours, and more based on the international standard SA8000 (and other international standards such as those adhered to by the International Labor Organization). Recognizing that there are real people working in conditions that do not meet international health, safety, income, and other standards was and continues to be an important area for Ocean Conservancy to shine a light on, especially in discussions with policymakers and other actors in the plastics and waste management space. Ocean Conservancy is a proponent of ocean justice, which it defines as "the fair and equitable distribution of both the benefits of the ocean's bounty and the burden of its complex care." The insights and experiences gathered through ASPPIRe and considered through the lens of ocean justice will help to inform future recommended actions to support ISWCs.

## Year One Highlights (March 2021–March 2022)

### In Colombia (despite pandemic lockdowns and some social unrest) accomplishments included:

- ▶ **Four cooperatives in two cities** (Buenaventura and Cartagena) engaged in the project, including capacity building trainings and baseline assessments of the cooperatives using the Social Fingerprint methodology.
- ▶ **Action plans for improvement** were developed in collaboration with all four cooperatives; implementation will take place in 2022.
- ▶ **197 "recyclers"** (ISWCs) across the four cooperatives participated in the project to collect more low-value plastic waste.
- ▶ A recycling company agreed to take the materials to **create durable goods**.
- ▶ Nearly **10 tons of low-value plastics** were collected (21,406 pounds)
- ▶ **CEMPRE organized beach cleanups** to engage the community, the local mayors' offices, and the collectors to highlight the environmental services provided by ISWCs – tangibly done through buttons proudly worn by recyclers that said, "My Job Protects the Ocean." – a reality that the project aims to amplify.
- ▶ **CEMPRE co-organized (with the Colombian government) a service fair** for ISWCs and their families to learn about government benefits, receive vaccines, and receive hair, dental and other healthcare services.
- ▶ CEMPRE and Ocean Conservancy received a positive reception during in-person meetings with **Colombia's Ministries of Environment, Planning, and Tourism** in March 2022 where learnings from the project were shared.
- ▶ CEMPRE and the Cartagena mayor's office signed an **MOU highlighting their shared vision and support** of the informal sector.

### In Vietnam (despite ongoing pandemic lockdowns) accomplishments included:

- ▶ 150 women, including ISWCs and the Women's Union, received **capacity building training** with a focus on health and safety.
- ▶ **50 female waste collectors participated** in the project to collect low-value plastics; these 50 collected recyclables from 2,000 households in Hanoi.
- ▶ **4,565 kgs (~10,064 lbs or about 8 tons) of low-value plastics** were collected and recycled from November 2021 through March 2022.
- ▶ CECR Vietnam developed an **engagement strategy through a social platform** (Zalo, similar to WhatsApp) to increase material separation at the household level.
- ▶ A recycling company agreed to take the **low-value plastics and create durable goods** with the material.
- ▶ **A strong partnership was developed** with the Vietnam Women's Union, which has led to their critical involvement in the implementation of the project.
- ▶ **A workshop was held** with national and local Vietnamese government representatives to share the findings and discuss expansion.
- ▶ **Vietnam's national television news** covered the ASPPIRe project in two different segments, as did the online press.

While these highlights show some successes in the first year, much more remains to be done to improve the living standards of the ISWCs and the circularity of materials.

This report covers the background, implementation, and findings from the first year of ASPPIRe's on-the-ground efforts from approximately March 2021-March 2022.



# Project Structure & Partners

To coordinate this initiative, Ocean Conservancy partnered with the Inclusive Waste Recycling Consortium (iWrc). Operating as the coordinating partner, iWrc worked closely with two in-country implementing partners: Compromiso Empresarial para el Reciclaje (CEMPRE Colombia) in Colombia and the Center for Environment and Community Research (CECR) in Vietnam.



Compromiso Empresarial para el Reciclaje (CEMPRE Colombia), founded in 2009, is the Colombia branch of CEMPRE, a non-governmental organization whose purpose is to strengthen waste recovery value chains and increase collection rates of post-consumer materials in Latin America. CEMPRE Colombia engages and supports communities, local informal waste collectors and other stakeholders in the waste recovery value chain to create a circular economy for materials. Through these activities, partnerships, and the capturing of data in their Knowledge Management Center, CEMPRE Colombia seeks to drive the development and sustainment of a circular economy in Colombia.



The Center for Environment and Community Research (CECR) was established in 2009 in Vietnam with the mission to promote and support the participation of organizations, businesses and communities in environmental protection and the development of effective responses to climate change. Services and areas of engagement that CECR provides include research, environmental education, environmental consulting, policy advocacy for addressing water pollution in Vietnam and advocacy for women's participation in environmental protection. CECR operates with the strong belief that solutions to environmental problems and climate change require local participation in both the development and implementation stages.



The Inclusive Waste Recycling Consortium (iWrc) is a global leader in fair trade labor practices in the waste and recycling sector. iWrc creates an environment where people, community, and business benefit from reducing and transforming waste into valuable resources. They eliminate individual risk factors for those who recycle in emerging markets and live on or below the poverty line – risk factors such as child labor, forced labor, and unsafe and inhumane working conditions.

iWrc provided the social assurance framework for the ASPPIRe project, a methodology called the Social Fingerprint) which is based on the principles of global workplace standards, mechanisms, and expert input to incrementally improve conditions.

# Implementation of Social Assurance Assessments & Trainings

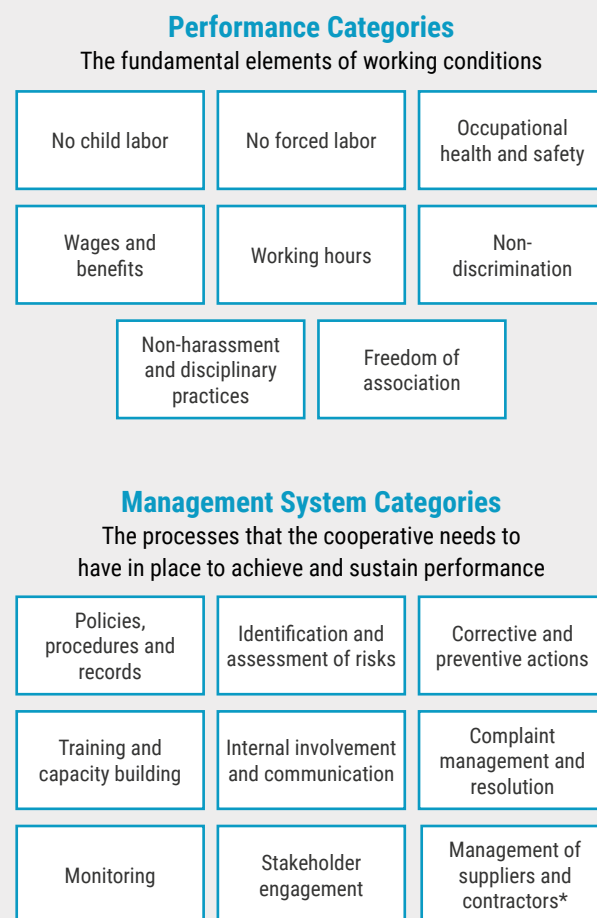
## Overview

For the ASPPIRe project, iWrc provided virtual and in-person experts to train and build capacity through the two locally based, in-country implementing partners using the Social Fingerprint methodology. iWrc partnered with Social Accountability International (SAI) – a global NGO working to advance human rights and socially responsible workplaces – to conduct assessments of the cooperatives and ISWCs in categories such as child labor, forced labor, health and safety, remuneration, work hours, and more based international standards. Once assessments were conducted, trainings were developed to address the most concerning areas. Due to the pandemic, much of the training was adapted to a virtual format until in-person site visits could take place.

As part of the iWrc model, SAI's Social Fingerprint program has been successfully applied in formal waste collector cooperatives in Brazil and has been used by thousands of companies in multiple sectors over the past decade. For the ASPPIRe project, iWrc and SAI are now successfully applying Social Fingerprint to the informal waste collector sectors in Colombia and Vietnam.

The categories fall into two groups: performance – fundamental elements of working conditions (e.g., no child or forced labor and health and safety) and management systems – processes that organizations need to achieve and sustain performance (e.g., policies, procedures, and record keeping). Figure 1 shows the full list of categories assessed.

Figure 1. Social Assessment Categories



\*Applicable only for large-scale, mature cooperatives

The categories are assessed, and each category is given a score (see Figure 2). The baseline assessment is then used to collaboratively create an action plan to address areas where the scores are lowest and those of higher priority. It is not uncommon for a cooperative to have several scores of one and two during its baseline assessment; the goal is to provide help and support rather than to overwhelm.

**Figure 2. Management System Maturity Scale**

Score	Management System Maturity
5	Developed and implemented <b>mature management system</b> with <b>continual improvement</b> of the system
4	Developed management system, implemented <b>consistently and regularly</b>
3	Developed management system, but <b>not fully implemented</b>
2	Partially developed management system, but implementation is <b>reactive, inconsistent</b> and mostly <b>ineffective</b>
1	<b>No awareness of SA8000</b> or any system in place to manage social performance

Because the Social Fingerprint methodology is flexible and modular, it can be customized to the immediate needs of the cooperative. For example, the cooperative can first tackle the issues that are the most relevant for legal due diligence and risk mitigation requirements, such as child labor, forced labor and life safety issues. Or, if these issues are not relevant, the cooperative might focus instead on other issues such as wages or health and safety issues that are not immediately life-threatening but still pose significant risks. The management systems categories can also be tackled in progressive steps. For example, a less mature cooperative might focus first on policies, procedures, internal communications, and trainings, whereas larger, more mature cooperatives might also tackle stakeholder engagement.

Given the nature of the informal sector in Vietnam in which workers tend to operate independently and there are no significant cooperatives or organized informal labor groups, application of Social Fingerprint presented a unique challenge. The program traditionally begins with initial training followed by an assessment of an organized cooperative structure and their physical worksite. However, due to Social Fingerprint’s heavy focus on training and capacity building, iWrc and SAI were able to modify the traditional approach and successfully leverage this focus, working together with CECR with a “train the trainer” method. More details on this approach will be shared in the section specific to Vietnam.

### **ASPPIRe Capacity Building and Awareness Training**

The project began with iWrc and each in-country partner convening important stakeholders in their respective geographies to discuss the goals of ASPPIRe, Social Fingerprint, and changes needed to build and scale the low-value plastic end markets along with the resource requirements and possible benefits for the informal sector and other actors. This step culminated in the creation of a shared vision and implementation plan.

These implementation plans involved the thorough assessment of cooperatives in Colombia using the Social Fingerprint methodology; the Social Fingerprint was tailored to fit the Vietnam context, which does not have cooperatives but individual collectors. Additionally, potential market partners (e.g., aggregators, brands, etc.) were confirmed.

iWrc, with the support of CEMPRE Colombia and CECR, rolled out these action plans and provided expertise in program management, social fingerprinting, technical support, infrastructure development and communications.



# Colombia



## Overview

Colombia has both a Pacific Coast and Caribbean Coast. Sadly, one does not need to look very hard to find plastic on its beaches, and among its mangroves – critical habitats for marine life and carbon sequestration, as well as buffers for coastal populations. According to research conducted by CEMPRE in the mangroves near Buenaventura, more than two-thirds of the non-organic materials found in the mangroves are plastics (by volume).

Colombia has regulations aimed at the protection and use of natural resources. In 2013, it focused on waste management at the municipal level and efforts to increase recycling. In 2016, recycling activities were moved under sanitary public service and the government created a pathway for recycling cooperatives to become formal service providers if they could meet certain standards. However, no cooperative has yet been able to complete the process. In 2018, Colombia passed an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policy that obligates plastic (and other material) producers with funding end-of-life management for materials they put into the market. There is also a growing understanding and promotion of the circular economy at the national level. In addition, some municipalities have sought to implement bans and regulation measures for plastic waste.

## Social Assurance in Colombia

The CEMPRE Colombia team attended six learning sessions conducted by iWrc and SAI on the components, evaluation format and scoring system of Social Fingerprint so that stakeholders could learn how the standard can be applied to the informal sector. After undergoing these trainings, CEMPRE Colombia visited the four cooperatives that had agreed to participate in ASPPIRe and conducted initial evaluations using the Social Fingerprint Assessment Tool. The initial evaluations found that no cooperative had an average rating above 2.41. Each of the cooperatives had “health and safety” and “management systems” rankings below a 2, with the exception of one cooperative that had a 2.0 for their “health and safety” rating. One cooperative achieved a 3 for the “working hours” indicator, which was the highest rating achieved for all cooperatives across all categories. Scores of 2 indicate systems to manage these concerns are partially developed, but are reactive, inconsistent, and/or ineffective; scores of 1 indicate no systems in place to manage these concerns in the workplace. See Table 1 below for full results.

**Table 1. Results of the Initial Social Assurance Evaluation of the Colombian Cooperatives**

Indicators (Social Assurances)	Cartagena Amigable	CORECICLAREC	COOARPOZ	ASOGESAMPA
Management Systems	1.69	1.71	1	1.4
Child Labor	2.63	2.6	2.7	2.86
Forced Labor	2.8	2.8	2.64	2.9
Health & Safety	1.9	1.88	1.25	2
Working Hours	3	2.2	1.2	2.4
Remuneration	2.3	2.3	2.2	2.6
Regular Employment	2	2.8	2	2.3
Freedom of Association	2.7	3	2.78	2.7
Discrimination	2.6	2.6	1.8	2.8
Disciplinary Practices	2	2.2	2.2	2.5
<b>Total Average</b>	<b>2.36</b>	<b>2.41</b>	<b>1.98</b>	<b>2.3</b>

Source: CEMPRE Colombia's Knowledge Management Center



## Planning Strategies Based on Social Ratings

CEMPRE Colombia used the findings of the initial evaluations to develop strategies for addressing the three lowest-performing indicators: health and safety, management systems and working hours. With the cooperation of the cooperatives, actions taken to address these areas include occupational safety and health training, the development of new procedures and policies for management systems and health and safety protocols and further review of existing procedures. The iWrc and CEMPRE teams check for progress in these areas after 3, 6, and 9 months.

## Increasing collection of low-value plastics

For the ASPPIRe project, Ocean Conservancy defined low-value plastics as those items that were not collected by waste collectors, but for which end-markets could be found if the materials increased were collected at-scale and thus increasing their value. Using this definition, in-country teams met with stakeholders to discuss and identify which low-value plastics would be targeted for the ASPPIRe project.

In Colombia, CEMPRE held workshops on low-value plastics at the cooperatives' facilities with ISWCs (called "recyclers" in Colombia) to discuss the goal of ASPPIRe to increase collection of low-value plastics with an emphasis on those most likely to end up in the ocean. Recyclers provided insights into the types of plastics that they observed in the work but which lacked the value to make collection worthwhile. The workshops offered the CEMPRE Colombia team the opportunity to hear directly from waste pickers what prevents them from prioritizing collection of low-value plastics. The four largest disincentives identified were lack of relationships between cooperatives and companies seeking feedstock, recyclers not knowing what types of low-value plastics are able to be processed, lack of separation at source, and low purchase value. By the end of the workshop, low-value plastics were identified that also had potential end markets. For Colombia, the low-value plastics identified were colored (mostly yellow) polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles; and multi-layered plastics.

After analyzing the workshops' findings, CEMPRE Colombia developed a three-stage pilot for engaging ISWCs in the collection of low-value plastics. The first stage was an awareness campaign for separation at-source targeted at sensitizing the public to sorting their own recyclables. Separating materials for recycling helps to keep them clean

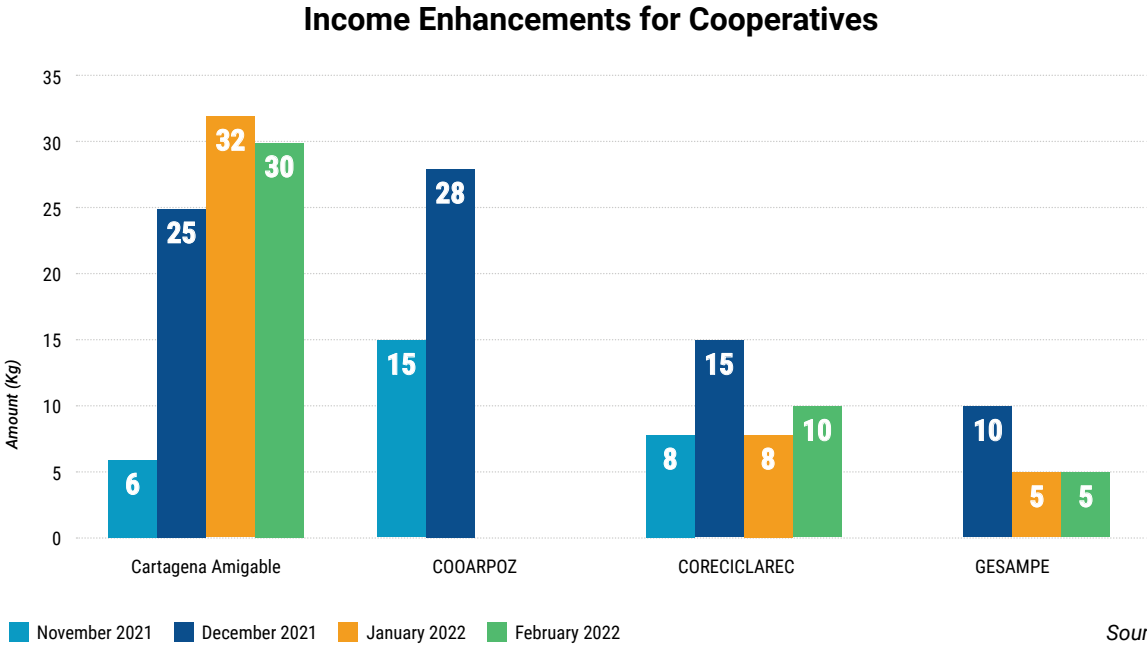
and makes it easier for waste collectors to do their job of collecting. Materials that are clean and that have not been damaged are more valuable to recyclers. In the pilot, community members were invited to deliver their recyclables directly to the cooperatives where upon drop-off they could learn how best to separate their materials for future collection or drop-off.

The second stage involved enhancing income for ISWCs. For every 45 kg (~99 lbs) of target material (colored PET, and multi-layered plastics) collected and aggregated, recyclers received an additional 45,000 Colombian Pesos (COP) or ~\$12 USD which represents about a 7.5% increase in income per month. Using baseline measurements, over the course of four months the pilot saw a drastic increase in colored PET collection in particular.

The results of this income enhancement plan from November through March 2022 are presented below. The distribution of the incentives via vouchers for things like groceries or vocational training is presented in *Figure 2. Bonuses Distributed to Cooperatives (Nov. 2021–Feb. 2022)*.

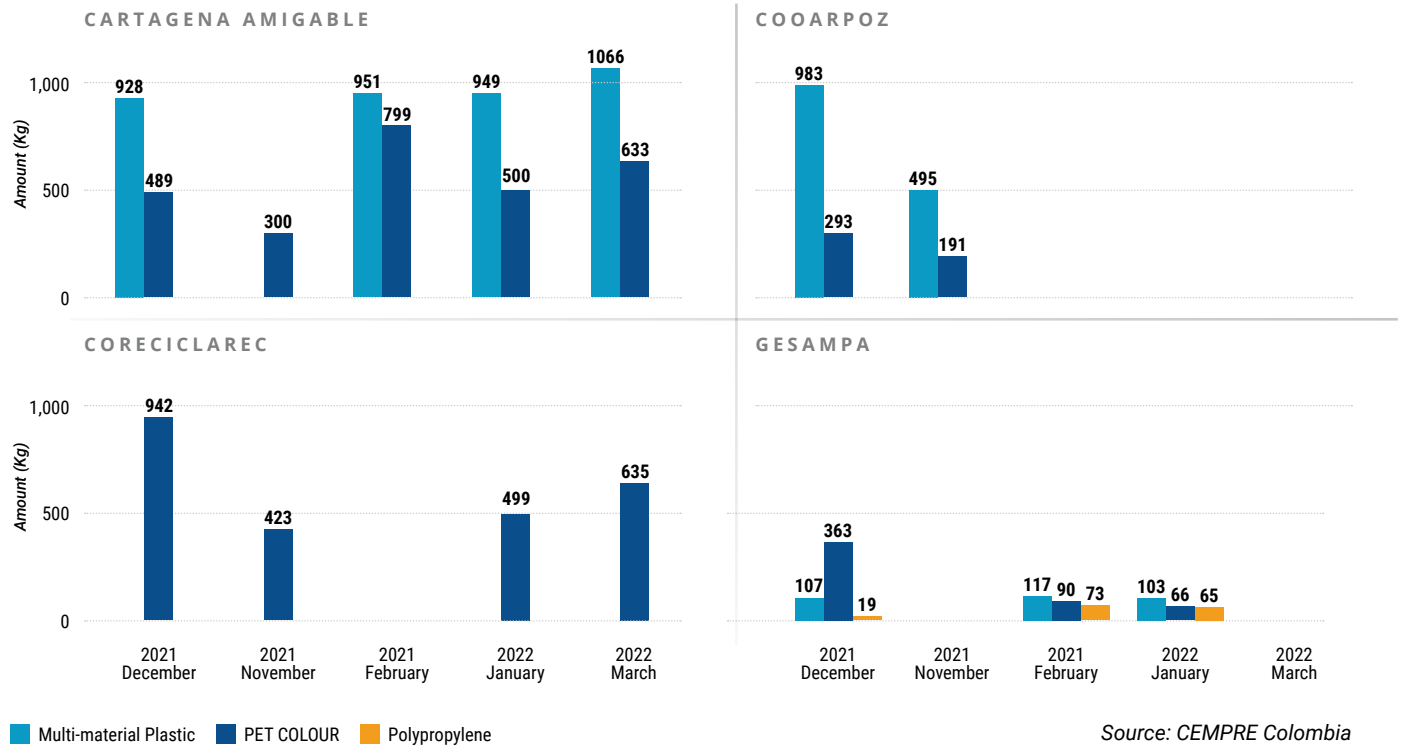
Enhancing income was intended to impact 198 recyclers in both cities. Enhanced income delivery commenced in November in the organizations of recyclers in the two cities. Monitoring was carried out monthly. In the below table, the number of individuals per cooperative who received enhanced income (~ 45,000 COP) is indicated per month, per cooperative.

**Table 2. Bonuses Distributed to Cooperatives by Number of Collectors (Nov. 2021–Feb. 2022)**



The third stage of CEMPRE Colombia’s incentive plan was fostering relationships between the cooperatives and processors in the region capable of managing the types of low-value plastics identified by the cooperatives. CEMPRE Colombia’s local partnerships with Movimiento RE (based in Cartagena) and Plataforma Pacifico (Buenaventura) were key to developing meetings between the cooperatives and processors. Both entities are consortiums that bring together companies and other organizations dedicated to improving waste management as part of the country’s EPR programs. CEMPRE and these multiple (but different) efforts resulted in four commercial deals between the cooperatives and processors; two processors based in the Cartagena region (Ganzaplast and Reciclamos Cartagena de Indias) and two based in the Buenaventura region (Plastilene and Ekored).

**Table 3. Distribution of Target Plastics Recovered During Pilot (kg) shows the type of materials collected by the cooperatives. For each city, the total amount of material recovered through the incentive plan corresponds to 8.7 tons in the city of Cartagena and 1.01 tons in the city of Buenaventura.**



Source: CEMPRE Colombia  
 Note: COOARPOZ did not report all months

The collection results show that low-value plastics can be collected at these price-points and end-markets developed.

CEMPRE Colombia and iWrc also found that some of the cooperatives lacked basic operational necessities, such as vehicle licenses and insurance, computer equipment, air conditioning, scales, uniforms, security measures, accounting advice and marketing materials. To address some of these basic needs, CEMPRE partnered with Movimiento RE. This partnership led to consultations with the four selected cooperatives to understand which resource deficiencies currently impede their collection and recycling activities; these consultations yielded funding to fill the resource gaps mentioned above.

## Development of a strategy to formalize ISWC organizations, per Decree 596/2016

In 2016, the Colombian government enacted Decree 596/2016 to support the formalization of the informal waste sector. It was created as an effort to address the exploitation of the ISWCs and recognize their significant role in Colombia’s national waste management system. To help the formalization of waste pickers, CEMPRE Colombia, with the support of Movimiento RE and Plataforma Pacifico, developed a plan and provided technical resources for cooperatives seeking to comply with the formalization requirements. Once formalized, the decree will allow for subsidies to the cooperative in the form of a service payment. The ASPPIRe project has prioritized trainings that will help support cooperatives with meeting the government’s standards to become formalized. To date, two of the four cooperatives involved with the ASPPIRe project are undergoing the full formalization process and one has recently initiated the process.

## Community outreach and engagement

CEMPRE Colombia developed five community-based activities, four in Cartagena and one in Buenaventura, to engage recyclers (collectors) and their communities.

These outreach activities included beach cleanups, food programs and social support programs aimed at ISWCs and their families across 12 cooperatives. Beach cleanups help to connect the social, environmental, and economic needs of an area.

In the city of Cartagena, beach cleanup days were held with the voluntary participation of the project's cooperatives, in alliance with local organizations such as Fundación Serena del Mar, Fundación Sentidos de la Tierra and the institutions of the public services office.

In the city of Buenaventura, the organization ASOGESAMPA developed "Tienda de Don Trueque," in which they worked to build understanding in the community regarding proper management of solid waste and where plastic waste was exchanged for groceries during a barter event. This strategy made it possible to contribute to the community's food security by learning the importance of recycling and how to identify what to recycle and how.



## Results in Colombia

- ▶ Four cooperatives in two cities (Buenaventura and Cartagena) engaged in the project, including capacity building trainings and baseline assessments of the cooperatives using the Social Fingerprint methodology.
- ▶ Action plans for improvement were developed in collaboration with all four cooperatives; implementation will take place in 2022.
- ▶ 197 “recyclers” (ISWCs) across the four cooperatives participated in the project to collect more low-value plastic waste.
- ▶ A recycling company agreed to take the materials to create durable goods.
- ▶ Nearly 10 tons of low-value plastics were collected (21,406+ pounds) in the first year.
- ▶ CEMPRES co-organized (with the Colombian government) a service fair for ISWCs and their families to learn about government benefits, receive vaccines, and receive hair, dental and other healthcare services.
- ▶ CEMPRES and the Cartagena mayor’s office signed an MOU highlighting their shared vision and support of the informal sector.
- ▶ The project led to an increase of 319% in the collection of low-value plastics, with 9.8 tons of low-value plastics collected within 3 months of implementation (multilayered plastics, colored-PET containers,).
- ▶ The incentives represented an additional 7.5% value in the average monthly income of ISWCs.
- ▶ Relationships were built and strengthened between the cooperatives and recycling processors which is critical to the plastics recycling value chain.
- ▶ The initial Social Fingerprint evaluation revealed that the baseline social performance of the four cooperatives was poor, with all indicators rating either *only partially developed with no implementation or lower*.
- ▶ The Social Fingerprint evaluations provided the opportunity to develop strategies for addressing the three lowest-performing indicators: health and safety, management systems and working hours.
- ▶ Due to the high visibility of floating waste in the mangroves, CEMPRES conducted a waste characterization study in Buenaventura (focused on the mangroves). The study identified plastic as the primary type of non-organic materials in the mangroves, the majority of which is expanded polystyrene/polystyrene; this study will be useful in discussions with policymakers.

## Additional Learnings in Colombia

- ▶ Building a relationship with the people closest to the work first and creating plans with the full engagement and support of the cooperatives ensured help was provided where it was most needed and tailored to each cooperative.
- ▶ Relationship building between communities and recyclers is critical – and one way to spark engagement is through community cleanups. CEMPRES organized cleanups that brought together community members, recyclers (ISWCs) and policymakers.
- ▶ Outside of the project scope, each cooperative was likely to have a list of basic needs that it lacks the resources to provide; critical necessities (small repairs, licenses, etc.) were identified to improve the efficiency of operations in four cooperatives.
- ▶ Sharing findings with the municipal and national government is critical for long-term transformation and incorporation of the informal sector into the national EPR scheme. CEMPRES and Ocean Conservancy visited the Colombian Ministries of Environment, Planning, and Tourism in March 2022 to shine a light on the informal sector and what had been learned and accomplished thus far through ASPPIRe. The information was well-received, particularly as Colombia continues to focus on building a circular economy.

# Vietnam



## Overview

Vietnam has over 2,000 miles (3,200+km) of coastline in addition to over 40 islands, areas that suffer from visible plastic pollution. The government has shown a strong commitment to tackling this issue. It has passed resolutions and strategies, and more recently the revised Environmental Protection Law of 2020 that emphasizes the need for a circular economy, and the implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policies for plastics.

Most ISWCs in Vietnam work independently and are not formally registered businesses, which makes it difficult for the government to track their contributions. This is a subject that CECR, Ocean Conservancy's partner in Vietnam, has highlighted in its communications and policy workshops with the various levels of government. Initial discussions have indicated that some government officials are interested in providing a framework for cooperatives that could become formal entities. This will also depend on the level of interest from the ISWCs. While there are likely a number of ways the ISWCs could be included in policies, there is an opportunity for the government to engage in inclusive dialogue.

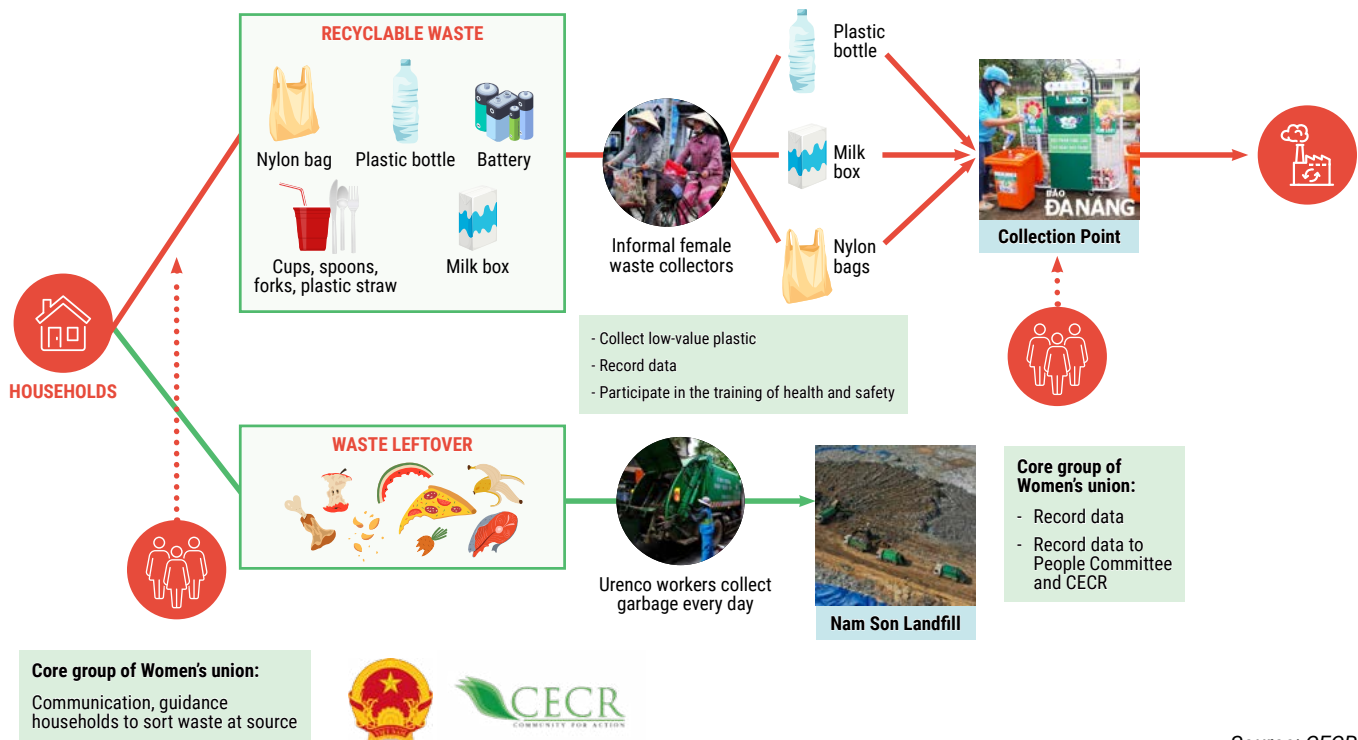
CECR has also worked to highlight that the majority of informal waste collectors in Vietnam are women; 100% of the ISWCs that participated in the ASPPIRE project identify as female. Ocean Conservancy's 2019 report *Gender and Waste Management* also found that women most often manage household waste in Vietnam and other countries in the region. The women waste collectors and the women at the household level became integral to the ASPPIRE project in Hanoi.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit and Vietnam had prolonged lockdowns throughout 2020 and 2021, ISWCs were not included in any financial government support, again because of their informal status. Vietnam's Resolution 42 provided some financial relief to the formally employed and employers. ISWCs were not permitted to conduct collection activities, and most could not leave the city, resulting in many relying on the kindness of neighbors to provide basic needs. This also highlights the importance of considering ISWCs in future public crises.

## Partnership with the Nam Tu Liem Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DONRE)

CECR began with mapping the plastic waste value chain in the Nam Tu Liem district of Hanoi which included identifying ISWCs, understanding the role of the Nam Tu Liem Department of Natural Resources (DONRE), and identifying a local recycling company that would accept the plastic bags to be collected. This led to the design a new local model for the collection, sortation and recycling of plastic bags and other items to drive the ISWCs' participation in the collection and classification of plastics bags (called nylon bags in Vietnam). CECR's plan was also informed by two factors of Vietnam's informal sector: ISWCs in Vietnam work independently as opposed to belonging to cooperatives; and the majority of ISWCs in Vietnam are women. Therefore, CECR's model was specifically developed to encourage the participation of individual female waste pickers and improve their health and safety.

**Figure 4. Model of Women Participating in the Sorting, Collection and Recycling of Low-Value Plastic Waste**



Source: CECR

CECR agreed on a plan with the Nam Tu Liem People's Committee and the Me Tri People's Committee (Me Tri ward is located within the Nam Tu Liem district) to conduct a pilot program. CECR concentrated on four residential groups, No. 2 Me Tri, No. 3 Me Tri Ha, No. 1 Me Tri Thuong and No. 4 Me Tri Thuong. CECR connected with 50 local informal waste collectors, as well as women's groups, to deploy the pilot. The pilot consisted of developing training materials and trainings sessions on waste audits, operational health and safety, and waste separation at-source as well as the launch of a related awareness campaign. This pilot ran from July 2021 until March 2022 once all relevant Vietnamese government agencies had reviewed and approved the project.

The ISWCs gathered the plastic bags at households that were made aware of the project and that agreed to separate the plastic bags for collection (including ensuring the bags were clean). The household leads (primarily women) joined a Zalo (messaging platform in Vietnam) group to share their efforts to segregate recyclables. The media also got involved; the Vietnamese national television station aired two segments featuring ASPPIRe and highlighting the women collectors and household leaders. The ISWCs collected the separated and cleaned plastic bags and other recyclable items in the waste, and then took the plastic bags to a collection point where the amount was documented for their enhanced income payment. The Vietnam Women's Union took on the role of managing the collection points and participating in the trainings, becoming a key player in the overall model.

In Vietnam, the collectors receive 3,000 VND (~13 cents USD) per kg of plastic bags collected, as well as an additional 2,400,000 VND (~\$100 USD) per month for the additional effort/hours worked. Select members of the Women's Union involved in training and supporting separation at the household level receive 1,700,000 VND (~\$70 USD) per month; and those who manage the collection points receive 1,200,000 VND (~\$50 USD) per month.





**Figure 6. A training session on waste segregation, communication and occupational health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic when groups had to be socially distanced and less than 30 people.**

Source: CECR

## Covid-19 relief program for ISWCs in Nam Tu Liem district

Many women ISWCs saw their income drop by 50% or more during the pandemic years of 2020-21 due to multiple lockdowns enforced by the government. At times, the public was not allowed to leave their home without documentation providing permission. Because ISWCs are not registered in a formal system, they were not able to access other relief provided by the national government and they were not designated as essential workers. They had an immediate loss of all income from collecting. In response to the profound impact that Covid-19 had on the livelihoods of the informal sector, CECR coordinated with the Nam Tu Liem Women's Union to organize a relief program, which was made possible with the financial support of the ASPPIRe project.

When restrictions lifted enough for small groups, a workshop was co-organized and launched by CECR and the Nam Tu Liem Women's Union in November 2021. The workshop aimed to support female ISWCs, ease the economic and social burdens caused by Covid-19 and work toward the larger goal of reducing gender inequality in the sector. The workshop drew the participation of 30 delegates from local organizations and stakeholders (the maximum number allowed to gather at the time).

CECR then coordinated with the Nam Tu Liem Women's Union to identify and collect information on 200 female ISWCs operating in the district and set up a program with Viet A Bank to open bank accounts for the women and deposit approximately \$175 USD in each to provide immediate relief. This is the equivalent of about two months of work for an ISWC. For most of the women, this was the first time they had ever had a bank account.

## Social Assurance in Vietnam

### Adapting Social Fingerprint to Vietnam's Informal Sector

iWrc and SAI adapted Social Fingerprint to the independent nature of the ISWCs in the Vietnam context. Engaging CECR with a “train-the-trainer” method, Social Fingerprint was implemented by CECR using the management systems and risk-based approach to develop training modules that fit the specific context of individual ISWCs in Vietnam, providing practical tools and tips to help them improve their livelihood, daily productivity and health and safety practices.

While conducting their training series, SAI was able to gain critical input from CECR on the general conditions of the ISWCs in Vietnam. During one session, SAI engaged the CECR team in order to identify the salient risks to individual ISWCs in Vietnam. This process not only allowed the team to identify the primary risks as health and safety as well as discrimination and wages, but also served as a practical learning process for CECR to apply SAI's risk identification approach in future scenarios.

To address the problematic lack of monitoring and reporting, CECR developed three types of logbooks that they will be responsible for maintaining: one logbook to be present at collection points, another to record the volumes of material collected by ISWCs, and another logbook for recyclers to record delivery volumes.

### Policy workshop

A policy workshop was conducted in March 2022 to share results, best practices and lessons learned from the ASPPIRe project in Vietnam to inform policymakers responsible for revising the Environmental Protection Law. The workshop also provided an opportunity for stakeholders to discuss solutions for formalizing the informal sector, the role of recycling companies, and the responsibility of governmental communication and engagement in plastic waste management. A key recommendation was to acknowledge the importance of local leadership and communication between local and national organizations to avoid the overlap of activities.

The virtual conference had 51 delegates including representatives from the Department of International Cooperation, the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations (VUSTA), the Vietnam Administration of Seas and Islands (VASI), Ocean Conservancy, Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), Nam Tu Liem People's Committee, the People's Committees of 10 wards in Nam Tu Liem, Lagom Vietnam (recycling company) and members of other international organizations, businesses and NGOs.



## Results in Vietnam

- ▶ **4,565 kgs (~10,064 lbs or about 8 tons) of low-value plastics** were collected and recycled from November 2021 through March 2022.
- ▶ CECR engaged **250 ISWCs in Nam Tu Liem** in their initial mapping of the district: 220 female ISWCs and 30 male ISWCs.
- ▶ **50 female ISWCs received access** to information and training, and they collectively earned (via the incentives for plastic bag collection) VND 800,000,000 (US \$34,806), separate from the Covid-19 relief cash payment.
- ▶ 10 trainings on waste audits, occupational health and safety and waste separation at source were organized for a total of **150 participants, including 50 female ISWCs** and members of women's unions and households.
- ▶ CECR developed numerous materials in Vietnamese including a **Waste Audit and Communication Toolkit**.
- ▶ CECR conducted separate **research on the impacts of COVID-19** on Hanoi's female ISWCs, including financial constraints experienced, demographic makeup of the ISWCs, and their need for a social safety net.
- ▶ **An awareness campaign** targeting 2,000 households in the Me Tri ward was conducted on the collection of low-value plastic waste and how to segregate waste in the household.
- ▶ CECR organized and launched a **COVID-19 emergency support program for ISWCs** in Nam Tu Liem district and through additional funds from Ocean Conservancy's ASPPIRe project, provided financial support for 200 ISWCs (approximately two months' income) during the lockdown periods.
- ▶ **CECR led a policy workshop** to share the results of the ASPPIRe project with government and other stakeholders to inform future revisions of the national Vietnam Environmental Protection Law (revised 2020); government officials showed strong support for expanding the model.

## Additional Learnings in Vietnam

- ▶ Understanding how and why to sort waste at source and the process of collecting low-value plastic waste among the community is nascent and will require additional time and resources.
- ▶ A participatory approach and regular meetings with stakeholders is the most effective way to engage local communities.
- ▶ ISWCs and junkshops are largely un-managed, independent operations, so engagement and training take a considerable amount of time and require incentives.



# Conclusions & Next Steps

While the first year of the ASPPIRe project has concluded, the project itself has continued for a second year (2022). Taking the learnings and successes of the first year, Ocean Conservancy and its partners, iWrc, CECR and CEMPRE will continue to expand the training and income enhancement models in both countries. In Colombia, CEMPRE and iWrc will expand the objectives of the ASPPIRe project from 4 cooperatives in two cities to 22 additional cooperatives (for a total of 26 cooperatives) in four cities. In Vietnam, CECR and iWrc will expand the incentive program and training from 50 female ISWCs to 150, which will service approximately 5,000 households in Hanoi.

In addition, Ocean Conservancy and its partners continue to share the learnings from ASPPIRe with national and municipal level government representatives in both Colombia and Vietnam, as well as the global community. As an international legally binding instrument on plastics takes shape at the United Nations, Ocean Conservancy will leverage its UN-designated observer status to call for inclusion of the informal sector in the process. It is critical that policymakers recognize and support the millions who contribute to collection and recycling globally and their environmental service to society, and to our ocean.

For more information about this project, please contact Edith Cecchini, International Plastics Director, Ocean Conservancy: [Ececchini@oceanconservancy.org](mailto:Ececchini@oceanconservancy.org).



# Appendix

## Acronyms

<b>ASOGESAMPA</b>	Asociacion De Gestores Ambientales Del Pacifico
<b>ASPPiRe</b>	Advancing Solutions for Plastic Pollution through Inclusive Recycling
<b>CARTAGENA AMIGABLE</b>	Asociacion Estacion De Clasificacion Y Aprovechamiento Centro De Acopio Cartagena Amigable
<b>COOARPOZ</b>	Cooperativa de Aseo Y Reciclaje del Pozón
<b>CORECICLAREC</b>	Corporación Recicladores Reciclar
<b>EPR</b>	Extended Producer Responsibility
<b>iWrc</b>	Inclusive Waste Recycling Consortium
<b>ISWC</b>	Informal sector waste collector
<b>PET</b>	Polyethylene terephthalate (polymer resin)
<b>PE</b>	Polyethylene (polymer resin)
<b>PP</b>	Polypropylene (polymer resin)
<b>PS</b>	Polystyrene (polymer resin)
<b>PVC</b>	Polyvinyl chloride (polymer resin)
<b>SAI</b>	Social Accountability International
<b>TPM</b>	Tons per month

## Ocean Conservancy Research and Reports

2019 *The Role of Gender in Waste Management: Gender Perspectives on Waste in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam*: <https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Role-of-Gender-in-Waste-Management.pdf>

2019 *Plastics Policy Playbook: Strategies for a Plastic-Free Ocean*: <https://oceanconservancy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Plastics-Policy-Playbook-10.17.19.pdf>

2020 *Exploring Solutions to Ocean Plastics: Supporting Southeast Asia's Informal Waste Sector*: <https://oceanconservancy.org/trash-free-seas/take-deep-dive/exploring-solutions-ocean-plastics/>

## Ocean Conservancy Blog Posts

Feb 2021: The Unsung Heroes of Vietnam's Waste Management Sector: <https://oceanconservancy.org/blog/2021/02/11/unsung-heroes-vietnams-waste-management-sector/>

Aug 2021: "My Job Protects the Ocean": How local recyclers in Colombia are partnering to keep plastics out of our ocean: <https://oceanconservancy.org/blog/2021/08/05/ocean-recyclers/>

## Media

Link to nhandantv.vn - national television coverage in Vietnam of the pilot model. The relevant segment starts at min 5:00 and goes to min 9:00. It is in Vietnamese, but gives an idea of the work through the visuals. They are highlighting the segregation and cleaning of different plastics that the informal sector can then collect: <https://nhandantv.vn/moi-truong-tai-nguyen-nang-cao-vai-tro-phu-nu-trong-cong-tac-bao-ve-moi-truong-d186758.htm>

Link to published article on CECR's website covering the first (of 8) training programs for the Women's Union, local officials, and female waste collectors: <https://cecr.vn/chuong-trinh-tap-huan-cho-to-cong-dong-va-cac-co-ve-chai-ve-phan-loai-thu-gom-rac-thai-va-an-toan-lao-dong-suc-khoe-tai-quan-nam-tu-liem/#>

Link to Cartagena Mayor's Office press release on supporting recycling and circular economy at an event with CEMPRE and Ocean Conservancy: <https://www.cartagena.gov.co/component/content/article/93-acciones-comunicacionales/4803-cartagena-y-compromiso-empresarial-para-el-reciclaje-de-colombia-firman-memorando-de-entendimiento-para-impulsar-la-econom%C3%ADa-circular-y-reducir-la-contaminaci%C3%B3n-de-los-ecosistemas-marinos-junto-a-ocean-conservancy?Itemid=515>

Link to world Circular Economy Forum session on inclusive recycling, featuring Ocean Conservancy as a panelist: <https://www.wcef2021.com/session/advancing-a-just-transition-to-a-circular-economy-scaling-up-individual-action-to-collectively-drive-systemic-change/>

## iWrc Management System and Approach

1. Confirm basic requirements at the cooperative to participate in the program
2. Schedule program presentation visit (onboarding)
3. Send the program presentation, the agreement, and the digital platform data sheet
4. Confirm interest in participating in the program and confirm signed agreement
5. Request essential documents
6. Confirm essential documents against checklist
7. Schedule & conduct operational checklist
8. Schedule & conduct Social Fingerprint
  - 8.1. Alert situation identified
    - 8.1.1. Report by email and indicate in the control sheet
    - 8.1.2. Go/No Go to continue work with the cooperative (alert dependent)
    - 8.1.3. Prepare & present the action plan
    - 8.1.4. Validate the action plan
  - 8.2. Request complimentary and additional documents based on assessment
  - 8.3. Complete Social Fingerprint
  - 8.4. Prepare results presentation (final report)
  - 8.5. Send the certificate & results
  - 8.6. Schedule & present results presentation
  - 8.7. Prepare & present the action plan
  - 8.8. Validate the action plan
  - 8.9. Monitor the implementation of the action plan
    - 8.9.1. Actions related to standard (SR policy, SPT, etc.)
    - 8.9.2. Training (SF, priority areas, supporting documents, etc.)
    - 8.9.3. Additional requirements (legal documents, H&S regulations, etc.)
9. Social Fingerprint re-assessment

