



# Balancing the Benefits and Challenges of Scrap Picking in Ghana; Addressing the Challenges Informal Scrap Picking Poses to Residents

Sophia Dauda

Faculty of Economics and Business Administration-Management Department, Catholic University of Ghana, Sunyani, Ghana  
Email: Sophia.dauda@cug.edu.gh

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## Abstract

Informal scrap picking has grown significantly in Ghana, characterised by men especially scavenging for plastics, metals and others in landfills, communities and streets. While these activities contribute to waste management efforts and circular economy, they also present challenges for residents. This paper presents the adverse effects the phenomenon poses to Ghanaian communities and the way forward. The phenomenon enables unauthorized invasion of people's properties leading to collection of valuable items, it presents an opportunity for others to pose as scrap pickers for other purposes that have the potential of endangering residents. The activity also has the tendency to generate fear and insecurity in communities. To mitigate these challenges, this paper proposes the establishment of community drop-off or donation points under the regulation of the local assemblies. Such centralised location will streamline collections, reduce neighbourhood scavenging and foster collaboration between pickers and residents. Also formalising the scrap picking activities through unions, operational guidelines and identification systems is recommended. By addressing concerns of both parties, a harmonious waste management system will be created that ensures a balance of the benefits of informal recycling and safety of residents with trust.

## Subject Areas

Circular Economy

## Keywords

Scrap Picking, Waste Management, Recycling, Ghana, Circular Economy

## 1. Introduction

Waste creation is an inevitable phenomenon, and items no longer useful to people

are discarded. In the Ghanaian setting, some homes have designated places where they dump such items. In some places, communities have dumping sites where every household goes to dump such items that are no longer useful. In urban communities, the assembly provides bins to households that consolidate waste that is picked up by waste collection trucks at a fee. Similarly, the assembly provides huge metallic bins for community consolidation points, which are picked up to landfills when full by waste collection companies such as Zoomlion Ghana. It is common to find households to dump or burn waste items within vicinities. According to [1], the predominant waste management approaches are burning, burying, indiscriminate disposal and reuse of items, of which the first three are not recommended approaches, meanwhile they are the dominant ones used in various communities and even organisations.

Waste is commonly defined as anything that is no longer useful to a person [2], though what one considers waste may be useful to another [3]. Waste management involves the collection, transportation, processing, and disposal of waste in a manner that protects the environment and persons [4]. Unlike developed countries, Ghana lacks structured waste management systems and is still struggling to implement policies and develop the needed infrastructure. While developed countries use recycling and waste-to-energy technologies, Ghana has yet to adopt such methods [5]. [6] emphasised Ghana's significant challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure and rapid urbanisation, which led to its ranking as one of the dirtiest countries in Africa. However, efforts are being made to improve this condition through community engagement and sustainable practices [7]. The circular economy concept is essential for concluding the conversation on sustainable practices in waste management. The circular economy concept encourages the continuous use of items, which in turn reduces waste. It challenges the traditional linear economy's approach of buy-use-discard and promotes a closed-loop system where products are recycled, reused, or repaired [8]. This concept truly excels when reverse systems are robust. However, the Ghanaian economy, which is still informal, makes such a system ineffective. Therefore, the buy-use-dump system.

Due to the buy-use dispose behaviour and the unorganised system of waste disposal, Ghana has witnessed a growth in informal scrap picking within our communities. It is common to see men pushing carts or hanging sacks on their shoulders, loitering in search of discarded metals, plastics, electronic gadgets and other things of importance to them. They are common in landfills, streets, and homes [9]. The activities of these men play an important role in recycling and waste management efforts [10]—promoting environmental sustainability and supporting the circular economy concept.

Publications and conversations around scrap picking have centered on the challenges the phenomena pose to the pickers. For instance, health concerns were reported by [11] stating how vulnerable the pickers are due to lack of proper protective equipment during their activities and physical abuse. Such were reiterated by [12]. Economically, scrap pickers earn low income [13] and they are unable to access

social security and other benefits making them more vulnerable [13]. Stigmatisation is also revealed to be a major challenge faced by the pickers [11] [14] [15].

Despite the importance of informal scrap picking in waste management, it not only presents challenges to the pickers but also presents a troubling phenomenon to residents in various communities. While studies have focused on the challenges posed to pickers, this paper explores the challenges posed to residents and how this could be managed to ensure minimised challenges to both parties.

## 2. Problem

Several countries are grappling with issues related to scrap-picking, with some having formalised such activities, others have yet to do so. For instance, due to a large informal workforce, urbanisation, and high levels of waste generation, informal pickers collect a significant proportion of waste in India. However, unlike Ghana, where these activities are unregulated, waste pickers, aggregators, and recyclers in India are highly networked and in cooperatives, making partnerships and policy implementation easy [16]. In Brazil, these pickers are in cooperatives, and government programmes support and integrate them into their formal waste management systems [17]. Similarly, in South Africa, waste pickers are included in formal waste management systems, and partnerships with private companies help to provide the training needs of pickers [18]. Other countries, such as Egypt and Pakistan, are making reforms aimed at improving conditions of the pickers and integrating them into their formal waste management system [16].

In Ghana, the contribution of these waste pickers is enormous, as there is no formal system that collects such waste from various locations as the pickers do. Due to the informal nature of the activity, the pickers do not only pose challenges to themselves but also to the residents or communities in which they operate through the following ways.

The scrap pickers collect their scrap and sell it to middlemen who are positioned at specific locations. These consolidation points are characterised by noise as they keep dismantling and fixing scrap items. These potentially pollute the environment and expose people nearby to other hazards. The pickers themselves sometimes accumulate their scrap in inappropriate areas or obscured places, posing a danger to residents as they perform their daily activities [19]. Sometimes, unusable items are inappropriately discarded, contributing to the same littering their activities should be resolving.

The activities of the pickers also pose health risks to residents as they carry hazardous waste unprofessionally, roaming from one place to the other. This can result in chemical exposures [19], which pose health and other environmental risks to residents.

Scrap pickers also pose a security threat to residents, as such people are unknown to community members. This makes it difficult to tell who is really picking scrap and who is surveying the neighbourhood for other purposes disguised as scrap pickers. According to [20], the presence of pickers leads to increased crime

rates as they may engage in activities that compromise security. Because of this perception, their presence breeds insecurity in communities.

Pickers collect valuable items that are not scrap intentionally or unintentionally. This not only causes inconveniences to households but also undermines trust and security in communities, thereby disrupting its potential waste control benefits. Similar concerns were raised by [21] in South Africa, who stated how such activities encroached on people's spaces leading to the collection of useful items. Also, [23] highlighted how such activities paved the way for pickers to collect items based on their discretion without explicit permission from owners. In some instances, the pickers damage people's properties such as metal fences, gates, drainage covers for their scrap purposes. A characteristic of those involved in the scrap picking is poverty or low income which may drive some pickers to act opportunistically, leading to the collection of non-scrap items, undermining the safety of neighbourhoods.

The presence of scrap pickers creates tension and fear in lonely areas. When they are not holding or pushing their usual carts, they appear as mentally ill people due to the kind of clothes they wear for their activities. Attire often serves as a cue for mental health as society perceives clothing as a reflection of mental health status where unconventional attire may signal distress. Pickers often wear worn-out or dirty clothes that appear unkempt and may be intimidating to some residents [22]. Already, pickers are viewed through negative lenses with assumptions on their lifestyle [23].

### 3. The Way Forward

Studies have revealed challenges faced by countries who have formalised or have tried to formalise the picker's activities. The challenges are rooted in infrastructural, socio-economic and policy related barriers. For instance [24] stated the pickers are hesitant to formalisation due to fear of losing social benefits or job security in Romania. [25] also reveal challenges due to the consideration of such people by authorities as a homogeneous group though they are of diverse operational conditions in Ahmedabad, India. Also [26] stated inadequate infrastructure for waste collection and recycling. Similarly to the Ghanaian setting, such challenges exist, [27] stated existing regulations do not recognize informal waste pickers in Ghana and suggests a participatory approach to addressing the issue.

To address the challenges posed to communities by the waste picking phenomenon, it is important to implement structured solutions that are community-based and also promote responsible practices. For instance, Citra Sentosa Mandiri implemented a waste bank programme where residents deposited recyclable waste in exchange for financial benefits [28]. The following are suggested as responsibilities for the local government, community leaders, residents, and scrap pickers.

#### 3.1. The Local Government

First and foremost, the assembly should establish drop-off points. The assembly

should identify or allocate suitable locations within communities just like they do for dumping sites. Unlike dumping sites which are mostly on the outskirts of communities, this location should be near or easily accessible to residents. Such locations should serve as drop-off points where residents can leave items such as plastics, metals, electronics and other items of interest to the pickers which they no longer need. Leaving items at the designated areas clearly indicates that such items are for collection. By creating such designated spaces, the need for pickers to roam in communities will be reduced, minimising the risk of valuable items being taken and other dangers posed by the phenomenon. Once the drop-off points are established, even other community members could help reuse properties dropped by others, which may be useful to them. All of these support the practices of circular economy.

Secondly, the assembly should develop a basic regulatory framework. A basic because, even countries developed than Ghana such as South Africa are still struggling to formalise their systems. However, one has to be intentional about formalising the activity by starting small. Therefore, the local authorities should encourage scrap pickers to form cooperatives or unions just as done in Brazil and South Africa. When such unions are formed, operational guidelines can be formulated for them, especially limiting them from roaming within residences. Also, a particular dress code or uniform outfits should be introduced for easy identification. Identification cards should be issued to pickers, and they should be encouraged to keep them during operations. This is to enable tracing should incidences that demand such become necessary. Operational areas should be allocated as well to ensure familiarity of pickers with residents.

Thirdly, Awareness campaigns should be organised by the local governments. Such campaigns should be geared towards encouraging responsible waste disposal, the use of the drop-off points and the role of scrap pickers. This will reduce the stigma towards pickers and promote a positive perception of the phenomena.

### **3.2. Community Leaders**

Community leaders through community engagements should encourage resident's participation in the utilisation of the drop-off points. Leaders should also advocate responsible waste disposal methods, ensuring waste sorting and that only items earmarked for the drop-off points are sent there. This will limit scavengers from loitering in communities.

Also, community leaders should monitor the effectiveness of the drop-off points and reports should be relayed to the assembly for continuous improvements.

### **3.3. Residents**

Community members should actively use the designated points for the right purpose by leaving items intended for scrap pickers at the drop-off points. This will reduce the need for pickers to roam through neighbourhoods.

Residents should be mindful of their surroundings and loitering of people in vicinities. Such activities should be reported to authorities to enable the appropriate actions to be taken. Residents should also provide feedback to leaders on the effectiveness of the designated areas and the challenges they face while adhering to the directives.

Residents should establish a positive relationship with scrap pickers. By doing so, pickers will be mindful of their activities and as well safeguard properties of residents from other unscrupulous people in the communities.

### **3.4. Scrap Pickers**

Scrap pickers along with the middlemen should actively participate in the formation of unions or cooperatives. By doing so, they can advocate for their rights and better negotiate for recognition within communities and the assembly. Pickers should adhere to wearing the identifiable attire proposed by local government. This will enable easy identification by community members.

Once the drop-off points are well designated and established, pickers should commit to using the location for their waste collection. Pickers should endeavor to follow the guidelines of not trespassing to reduce unauthorized scavenging. Pickers should also report to community leadership should unfamiliar scavengers be seen in their operational areas to enable appropriate actions to be taken by all stakeholders.

### **3.5. Economic Implications of Formalising the Scrap Picking Industry**

Formalising the scrap picking phenomenon presents enormous economic implications, particularly in improving the lives of waste pickers and enhancing waste management systems in communities. By formalising, pickers could get higher wages and better conditions since they will be able to negotiate prices with middlemen, whom they sell to.

Residents who decide to sell their properties to scrap pickers would be able to do so since pickers can easily be located and negotiation can also be done, resulting in some financial gains for residents too.

With formed cooperatives, support could be solicited from authorities such as the assembly and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for financial, equipment and protective wears which will generally improve livelihoods of pickers.

The designated drop-off point would be taken care of by a community member or an appointed person from the Assembly. This is an employment avenue, giving another person a livelihood.

The assembly as well will generate revenue should cooperatives be formed. At the moment, these scrap dealers do not pay any form of taxes because of the informal nature of their jobs. If they are in cooperation with operational areas assigned, the assembly will be able to locate them and get them to take part in contributing to development financially.

## 4. Conclusion

Ghana's informal scrap collection problems are a reflection of larger problems in the unorganised waste management industry. Although scrap collectors are essential to recycling initiatives, towns and households have faced serious issues as a result of the lack of control and defined borders. Ghana can reduce the risks connected with unregulated scrap collection and encourage ethical collection practices by creating designated scrap donation stations within neighbourhoods. This strategy promotes a more orderly and courteous system by supporting scrap collectors' livelihoods in addition to addressing the concerns of locals. In the end, putting such community-centred solutions into practice can result in a more peaceful and sustainable environment that benefits the informal recycling industry as well as the community.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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