RESPONSIBLE SOURCING INITIATIVE CASE STUDY



Building collective voice and economic empowerment for waste pickers in Indonesia

BACKGROUND

Indonesia's waste management system is held together in large part by the labor of its informal waste pickers – known locally as pemulung – whose contributions to material recovery remain deeply undervalued and largely unprotected. According to the Indonesian Waste Pickers Association (Ikatan Pemulung Indonesia), there were 3.7 million waste pickers in 2019[1] relying on collecting recyclables for their daily income, not including employees in related sectors such as waste sorting and processing. Structural inequality is further compounded by the absence of a collective voice. The lack of institutional support, such as cooperatives and unions, limits Indonesian waste pickers' ability to improve their wellbeing, and existing organizations do not yet represent the majority of workers, especially in cities outside Jakarta.



In the community of Bintara, Bekasi, Greater Jakarta Area, Ibu Yuyun begins her mornings like many other women – balancing household responsibilities while collecting municipal waste to earn money to support her family.

In her late sixties, she is also a respected religious leader in her community, someone people often turn to for guidance.

Over the years, she observed that many waste pickers in her community did not have any form of identification or other formal means of recognition. Without this documentation, they were excluded from basic services such as healthcare, education, and other government welfare programs. This created a vicious cycle of exclusion for many in the neighborhood.

"If you are alone and you don't have documents, you are always worried," she says. "You cannot deal with the government. You always feel unsafe."

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Years earlier, she tried to raise the issue with local authorities. The response was dismissive. "They told me, 'You are a waste picker. You pick the waste. Don't get into all this.'"

The experience had a lasting impact on her perspective. It led her to reflect not only on her own future, but also on how conditions could be improved for others in similar situations. She continued thinking not only about her own future, but about what could be different for others like her. "I was thinking about the future," she says. "Not only my future, but everyone's."

INTERVENTION

Building collective strength, step by step

In 2025, as part of the Responsible Sourcing Initiative (RSI) in Indonesia, Ibu Yuyun found renewed hope when RSI implementation partner Rangkul began discussions with the community on collective representation – the idea that waste pickers could be stronger together than alone.

With support from Rangkul, Ibu Yuyun and other women began organizing waste pickers into a group locally known as a paguyuban. Nearly 40 women joined the group, and Ibu Yuyun was selected as its leader.

Many women were initially skeptical, as they had seen short-term initiatives before. What convinced them was not theory, but something practical and immediate: support in obtaining identity cards. For many waste pickers, especially migrants, securing an ID card was complicated and costly. Applying individually often required returning to distant hometowns, navigating unfamiliar procedures, and covering expenses they could not afford.

[1] Ocean Plastic Prevention Accelerator (OPPA) (2022) "The importance of the informal waste workers in Indonesia," Medium, 6 January [online]. Available from: https://medium.com/@oppa_indonesia/the-importance-of-the-informal-waste-workers-in-indonesia-603df28d9052 (Accessed: April 30, 2026).

"If you are alone," Ibu Yuyun explains, "you have to go back to your hometown. You need money and time. Most people don't do it."

With collective support, the process became more manageable. Documentation was compiled, forms were reviewed, and errors were addressed through a collaborative effort.

Meanwhile, Rangkul and other local partners also conducted training sessions on the importance of identity cards, basic literacy and numeracy, and health and safety. Through these sessions, members began learning how to read notices, understand numbers, check weighing scales, and adopt safer health and safety practices in their daily work.

A turning point: from invisibility to recognition

A key moment came when, following sustained efforts by the group and support from local RSI partners, civil registration officials visited the community directly to process ID cards. "That never happened before," Ibu Yuyun says. "Officials came here. They took biometrics here."

For women who had long felt invisible, this moment was significant. Acting collectively reduced fear and built confidence. Around 20 women in the group were able to obtain identity cards through the process. "When we do it together, we are not afraid," she says. "We felt stronger as a group."

OUTCOMES



From collective strength to economic empowerment

Today, the group has 32 active members, meets regularly, and continues to reflect on what more can be achieved together. For Ibu Yuyun, the organization represents more than access to documentation – it is a pathway to economic empowerment.

She understands the daily constraints the women face. Between household responsibilities and care work, many collect only about one kilogram of recyclable materials per day. When selling individually, aggregators often refuse such small quantities or delay payment until larger volumes are brought.

To address this, Ibu Yuyun envisions collective selling through the establishment of a waste bank. By pooling materials, members can negotiate better prices, sell more consistently, and reduce the risk of being turned away. Collective sales could also create a foundation for savings – with a small portion of earnings set aside into a shared pool. This would allow members to save regularly and access small loans during emergencies.

Beyond income, the group has become a space for learning and growth. Members can learn to improve sorting practices, strengthen financial discipline, explore alternative income opportunities, and reinforce health and safety awareness.

For Ibu Yuyun, the group is not only about earning more – it is about building stability. She hopes it will continue to grow steadily, strengthening collective resilience and creating a more secure livelihood for all its members.

LEARNINGS

Collective economic resilience underpins long-term transformation

This experience demonstrates that building collective representation in informal recycling value chains must start with addressing practical, immediate needs. For many waste pickers, access to identity cards is not just documentation – it enables recognition, inclusion, and reduced vulnerability. Early interventions that deliver tangible outcomes help build trust, credibility, and sustained participation.

For organizations designing and implementing responsible sourcing interventions, this underscores the importance of first addressing foundational barriers such as access, documentation, and recognition before advancing to more complex efforts. Sequencing interventions – from basic inclusion to economic strengthening and leadership development – supports more durable impact. Continued facilitation and capacity building are critical in fragmented systems, while strengthening collective economic resilience is key to enabling long-term transformation.

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