

İzDönüşüm (İzmir Transformation)

Case Study: How the İzDönüşüm project improved waste pickers' livelihoods in 8 districts of İzmir, Türkiye



City/Project Site: İzmir

Country: Türkiye (Turkey)

Key Impact Area: Collect & Recycle

Sub-Category: Community-based Waste Management; Collection; Recycling

Key Terms: #informalwastesector #recyclingfacility

Project Partners/Target Reach: Government/Authorities; General Public (communities, etc.); Private sector; Professionals (waste workers); Municipalities (Metropolitan and District), Union of Municipalities of Türkiye, EY (Ernst&Young) Türkiye

Timeline: September 2022 - Current
(Note: Expected to close out due to changes in the administration.)

KEY SUCCESSES

- **A recycling business model and app were developed** to help connect recycling workers with the general public seeking waste pick-up, allowing the municipality to have an overview of and plan collection routes, thus increasing efficiency.
- **60 waste pickers were employed**, including 30 who were employed via several cooperatives including the Karşıyaka Roma People Cooperative - a key collaborator in the project. This provided them with benefits such as social security, safer working conditions and fixed working hours. Legal status of waste pickers as municipality officers with uniforms granted them a reputable recognition among the public.
- **The average collection rate of plastics and other recyclables nearly doubled**, increasing from an average of 250 tonnes/month in 2022 to 400 tonnes/month in 2023 (of which around 14 - 17% are plastics).
- **A total of 4400 tonnes of waste was collected with about 800 tonnes of plastic recycled**, in just 14 since the opening of the facility in 2022.



Collected coloured plastic are baled together



Customised vehicles outfitted with electric motorcycles are used to collect household waste

BACKGROUND

WWF-Türkiye has been working with the Metropolitan Municipality (MM) of Izmir since 2019 when the city joined Plastic Smart Cities. At the time, waste segregation at the source was not widely practised in Türkiye. With insufficient waste infrastructure, historically it had been informal waste pickers who collect recyclable material from common waste bins. These activities are unregulated and unmonitored, with no health and safety measures, causing health hazards for waste pickers, who are most often from underprivileged backgrounds. Taking into account this situation and the importance of informal waste pickers as allies in recycling, WWF-Türkiye sought to better understand the situation. After conducting a situation analysis, the city announced its action plan in 2022, resulting in the development of IzDönüşüm as a key project.

Project Objectives

- Increase recycled (particularly plastic) waste and also transform the lives of citizens who collect waste from the streets.
- Waste collection and sorting workers employed by İzDönüşüm no longer have to rummage through garbage bins but work in more hygienic conditions, with a fixed salary and insurance.
- Waste is collected from İzDönüşüm bins by trucks and electric motorcycles and are brought to the packaging waste collection and sorting center in Konak.

INTERVENTION APPROACH

WWF kicked-off this project by connecting different stakeholders to improve the collection and recycling system in Türkiye with a rights-based approach:

- **Situation Analysis:** At the end of 2021, WWF-Türkiye started a series of workshops with the Union of Municipalities and Ernst & Young (EY) Türkiye. During the workshops, examples of good practices, problems experienced in the field and solution suggestions, as well as the place of waste pickers in the recycling chain were discussed with stakeholders from different sectors. In-person ethnographic research was also conducted by accompanying waste pickers in their daily journeys to better understand their pain points and potential areas for improvement.
- **Planning and Piloting:** WWF-Türkiye and EY worked with Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality to develop a *Recycling Workers Business Model and Roadmap*, then piloted this in a neighbourhood in Gaziantep.
- **Izmir Waste Management Set-Up:** In line with Izmir's efforts for a city with planned waste management, the İzDönüşüm project within İzDoğa (Izmir Nature) was launched in September 2022. WWF facilitated the sharing of pilot experiences with Izmir MM who then replicated them:
 - **Waste Collection System:** İzDönüşüm bins and containers were installed on the streets and in densely populated areas such as shopping malls, factories and hospitals. Waste pickers were then employed.
 - **A Packaging Waste Collection and Sorting Facility** was set up, to ensure that mixed urban waste can be quickly sorted at a single centre, so that recyclable and recoverable waste can be brought into the economy.

RESOURCES

At the beginning of the project Izmir MM invested in providing a collection and separation facility and more than 20 small electric vehicles for waste pickers. In addition, new collection bins were also installed. The waste pickers are either directly employed on İzdönüşüm's pay-roll or by the cooperatives.

RESULTS

The *Recycling Workers Business Model and Roadmap* was created with the initiative of Gaziantep MM in cooperation with WWF-Türkiye and EY. The model was based on the idea of turning waste pickers into entrepreneurs who work with the municipality. A pilot study was then conducted in a neighbourhood of Gaziantep MM to test the business model. During this phase, a mobile application was developed to connect waste pickers with building management while allowing for the municipality to monitor transactions. WWF-Türkiye then shared this business model with Izmir MM.

To replicate the business model, Izmir MM hired waste collection teams to collect packaging and textile waste from İzdönüşüm bins and containers across eight districts of Izmir, allowing for waste to be segregated into categories (aluminum, coloured plastic, cardboard, white paper etc). In a nutshell, the efficiency of collecting plastic as well as other recyclables increased more than two-fold -- from an average of 250 tonnes/month in 2022 to about 400 tonnes/month in 2023. Additionally, waste pickers were formally employed, giving them access to increased rights.



Comic strip showing the steps of İzdönüşüm's pilot waste collection system using a mobile application



Waste segregation conveyor line in the sorting facility

CHALLENGES

- **Socio-economic considerations:** Employing waste pickers and securing their social insurance limits their capability to roam freely, which is undesired as competitive waste pickers are able to collect more in unregulated areas than those in regulated positions. The high volatility of income is regarded by “hard-working” waste pickers as opportunity rather than risk. However, regular working hours and days, and other social benefits (vacations, social security, meals) provided by İzdönüşüm helps to overcome this perception.
- **Social issues:** Often, the largely informal nature of waste businesses attracts illegal immigrants and other disadvantaged groups most impacted by inequality and discrimination seeking informal work. This exists alongside the reality that organised crime groups tend to find, dominate and exploit such systems in the informal or shadow economy. By working with cooperatives formed by waste pickers, İzdönüşüm is helping to lift waste picking work out of the shadow and into the formal economy, and away from the influence of organised crime.
- **Economic shift:** The proposed deposit return scheme (DRS) for beverage containers - expected to start in 2025 - is expected to have an impact on the amount and flow of household recyclable waste that can be recovered. As a result, it is projected that the waste pickers would not be able to collect as many beverage containers in the long run, which might decrease availability of material and potentially affect income.

REPLICATING & SCALING

The intervention started with only one neighbourhood, but with the motivation of the Mayor at the time was able to replicate to 8 neighbourhoods in Izmir, reaching over two million people in just over 1.5 years. In this short period of time, the municipality hired and trained waste pickers in the new neighbourhoods as well as set up the collection and transportation of waste to sorting facilities.

The existing contact with the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye and the continuous engagement with them throughout the course of the Gaziantep waste picker project implementation is expected to be a major factor in the replication of similar interventions in other parts of the country.

The project’s recyclable waste collection business model, including the mobile application developed, has resulted in the improvement of the working conditions and efficiency of waste pickers. This can easily be adopted and replicated in other cities.

Enabling Factors

National & Municipal Government Support: The Ministry of Environment published The Wastepickers Circular No. 2022/6. This Circular authorizes and regulates the working system by registering those who engage in waste collection on an independent basis.

A key enabler was the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality's decision to collect recyclable waste by employing waste pickers and setting up a collection and recovery facility. Prior to this, the service of collecting recyclables was provided only by private sector companies that did not show interest in the social aspects of waste management, including the welfare of waste pickers.

SUSTAINABILITY

- The parent company İzDoğa is making money by selling the recyclables, which guarantees the financial sustainability of the project.
- At the initial scaling phase, investment at the municipality level is essential.
- Leadership of the Metropolitan Municipality underlined the social aspect to start with, and only secondly came the financial aspect.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Incentivise waste segregation** by sharing the income generated by waste collection with waste generators (i.e. public).
- **Turn waste pickers into entrepreneurs** by creating an award mechanism on the basis of collected waste.
- Existing laws, fees and penalties regarding waste mismanagement should be **more strictly enforced** at the citizen level.
- **Consider the existence of waste pickers as an economic entity rather than a security threat.** A solution is needed to enact the policy to regard waste pickers as an integral part of the system.

Note: The İzDönüşüm project is now ending due to changes in administration and is thus phasing out.



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