

“Let’s talk about recycling” - a survey by UNDP Accelerator Lab, Ghana

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UNDP Accelerator Lab, Ghana has been exploring, mapping solutions, and experimenting in the waste-management space, applying behavioural insights, collective intelligence, and ethnographic approaches. To generate primary data about the complex systems of issues affecting waste-management and recycling in particular, we collaborated with the [Ghana Waste Recovery Platform](#), being facilitated by UNDP and [Young Reporters for the Environment](#), to launch a [Let’s talk about recycling](#) survey (powered by Airtable). Headline results are in this infographic.

Most of the 405 respondents live in the Greater Accra (67%) and Ashanti (11%) regions of Ghana. 45% are female and 53% male¹. 77% said their communities are badly affected by plastic litter to at least some extent.

Who segregates what and how?

41% segregate their waste, but the majority do not, mainly because they do not know who will collect the segregated waste (16%).

Those who segregate support different economic activities including food-processing and the creative sector. Some give glass waste to craft companies who produce traditional glass bead jewelry; compost food waste into manure for farming; sell plastic bottles to juice-makers who bottle sobolo (a hibiscus-based drink); and donate plastic waste to youth-led recycling schemes for making school bags. 23% segregate their waste regularly – we call them *Eco-conscious Kofis and Amas!*

Which recyclable materials are generated daily?

36% said plastics, but many would like to segregate paper, glass, electronics, and food, suggesting opportunities for green entrepreneurs.

“There should be facilities for people interested in electronic hobbies to salvage parts for makerspaces.² (Greater Accra)

Organic waste (cocoyam, plantain, yam) can be sorted and sent back to gardens or farms. (Ashanti)”

However, efforts to segregate are sometimes hampered by errors in handling waste.

“Personally, I will segregate waste 24/7 but the eventual collectors do not, they collect everything into the same thing- that is the problem. (Greater Accra)

¹ 2% did not answer this question

² A place in which people with shared interests, especially in computing or technology, can gather to work on projects while sharing ideas, equipment, and knowledge.

I put the plastic bottles in a separate bag and give it to the company that collects our rubbish.

Sometimes I see they add it to the general rubbish. (Greater Accra)"

50% of those who segregate waste have it collected by waste pick-up companies. 32% go to recycling facilities, and the rest rely mainly on informal-sector waste collectors. Zoomlion (Ghana) Limited was most often mentioned for waste pick-up. SME's, including Sesa Recycling, Coliba, Jekora Ventures and Nwura were also mentioned. There are huge quantities of catering waste (plastic bottles and polystyrene containers) generated at large social events in Ghana, particularly funerals. Several catering businesses called for practical support to recycle this waste.

Informal-sector

Respondents highlighted the significant contribution informal sector waste-pickers and collectors make to recycling, but said they should be organized better and supported, given the potential for recycling to create jobs and stimulate local economies. However, some pointed to low incomes from waste-picking (an average of 50 pesewas from selling 1 kg of plastics) as a disincentive

What would make segregation and recycling easier?

The top 3 things are: more community recycling facilities (17%); making facilities more visible and easier to find (16.4%) and increased awareness (15.8%). The lack of affordable bins, and accessible collection and recycling facilities seems particularly acute outside Accra. About 60% said they would only travel up to 10 minutes on foot to use a community recycling facility.

"Big companies should provide recycling bins at low/no cost or things will not change. (Greater Accra)

Assemblies should ensure we know where facilities are - make them easier to access without a car. Are there any outside Accra? (Greater Accra)

I live in a peri urban community. There is no recycling center in the whole district – about 30 km from Kumasi. (Ashanti)"

To raise awareness effectively, many respondents suggested using more Ghanaian languages and less English in public campaigns, and tailoring communication to suit the different levels of environmental awareness in communities. This could be a combination of repeated public-education campaigns to get basic messages across, and gradual education of communities about more complex concepts, for example developing a broader appreciation of the benefits of recycling.

Incentives

Only 10% of respondents said they would only recycle if they were paid to, but many suggested incentives including pay-back or points-redemption, to cultivate and sustain segregation habits.

"Some token amount to people, especially young children, and youth, for bringing a certain quantity of pure water sachets, plastic bottles, old shopping, and fertilizer bags, to the recycling containers. (North East)

Nwura provides points for households who sort their waste, retrievable in cash at a point in time. This has encouraged more households to sort their waste.” (Western)

Provide some incentive for the recycling bins to be emptied regularly. We see such bins overflowing ... making all around very filthy and defeating the purpose for providing [them].
(North East)”

Next steps

These insights have informed our support for grassroots innovation projects, with grants from the [AccLab Ghana COVID-19 Innovation Challenge](#). The initiatives include:

- Organization of waste pickers in Ashanti region to collect waste for recycling using mobile phone (USSD) systems and providing them with social insurance.
- In the Northern region, supporting efforts to transform agricultural waste such as rice husks into smokeless briquettes as an alternative to conventional charcoal and firewood.
- Supporting door-to-door collection of plastic waste in the Ga West Municipal District of Greater Accra, using a mobile-phone (SMS) system. Communities are being incentivized to segregate plastic in exchange for groceries and PPEs.