



International
Society of Waste
Management,
Air and Water



International
Partnership for
Expanding Waste
Management
Services of Local
Authorities

IGES
Institute for Global
Environmental Strategies

CCET
IGES Centre Collaborating with
UNEP on Environmental Technologies

A Special Session on The Circular Economy in South Asia: Regional Progress and the Role of Informal Waste Sector in a Just Transition

The 15th IconSWM-CE & IPLA GF 2025

October 30, 2025

2:25 – 4:20 PM India Standard Time

(5:55 – 7:50 PM Japan Standard Time)

Graphic Era University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India

Key Takeaways

Key Takeaway 1: Progress is Varied, but the Policy-Practice Gap is Universal

A comprehensive regional overview by Dr. Ezra highlighted that while the concept of CE is gaining momentum across South Asia, progress is varied. India demonstrates regional leadership through the implementation of national-level regulations and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks. Other nations are integrating CE principles into sectoral policies, or are in more nascent/early stages.

A persistent "policy-practice gap" has been identified across the entire region. This gap, a key challenge to be overcome, is primarily driven by three systemic hurdles:

- **Limited CE Financing:** There is insufficient investment, weak policy incentives, and private capital remains in its infancy.
- **Lack of Standardized Data and Monitoring:** The absence of reliable data on material flows and recycling hinders measurable progress.
- **Technical Capacity and Infrastructure Deficiencies:** Gaps persist in collection, sorting, advanced recycling infrastructure, and required skills across sectors.



Key Takeaways

💡 **Key Takeaway 2: The Critical Need for Sub-National Action and Local Solutions**

It is clearly evidenced that closing this policy-practice gap requires action tailored to local contexts:

Dr. Bakshi's presentation on India demonstrated the necessity of developing Sub-national (state-level) Circular Economy Action Plans, citing Gujarat as a case study. A co-creation approach, involving government, industry, and academia, is essential to tailor plans to specific local industrial ecosystems and waste challenges, avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" national approach.

Mr. Jackson's case study from the Maldives provided a practical, inspiring example of local resilience. The Soneva Namoonaa initiative showed that by establishing on-island Waste Management Centers for auditing, segregation, and processing, communities can end environmentally destructive open waste burning. This model dramatically reduces logistics, fuel costs, and carbon emissions, proving that even remote areas can create a viable circular economy.



Key Takeaways

🔑 Key Takeaway 3: The Informal Sector is the Unacknowledged Backbone of Circularity

The current resource recovery landscape is underpinned by a vast and active informal sector, waste pickers and aggregators who are the unacknowledged backbone of recycling in South Asia.

They are crucial enablers of the circular economy, responsible for recovering a significant volume of recyclable materials, particularly plastics, in countries like Nepal and Bangladesh.

As the presentation on case studies from Asia highlighted, in places like Cambodia, surveyed workers are 100% engaged in collecting plastic, proving they are essential "hidden heroes".

Key Takeaways

- **Key Message 4: Formal Integration is a Human Rights and Economic Imperative**
 - Despite their critical economic contribution, these workers remain "legally invisible and socially marginalised". They face significant challenges, including economic insecurity, health risks, and gender inequity.
 - Moving toward a structured circular economy requires a Just Transition. The strategies for formal integration must be adopted regionally. This requires:
 - Providing formal recognition and integrating them into co-designed strategies.
 - Ensuring social protection, such as life and health insurance.
 - Guaranteeing a decent, safe working environment and personal protective equipment.
 - Complete elimination of illegal engagement of children in the informal waste sector.
- Transforming waste management systems into socially inclusive circular economies must involve strategies that build capacity, enable economic empowerment, and protect human rights.

THE WAY FORWARD

- Today's discussions, from Mr. Ezra's findings to the Interactive Panel, revealed unanimous agreement: all regional stakeholders see a strong need for a Regional CE Framework, citing gaps in data, policy, business models, and financing.
- Regional collaboration is essential, single-country action alone cannot address transboundary environmental challenges.
- Our collective responsibility is to move from aspiration to implementation.
- Through regional cooperation, we can close the policy-practice gap, mobilize finance, harmonize standards, and ensure a just transition for those relying on waste recovery.
- Together, we can transform resource pressures and waste crises into opportunities for sustainable growth, green jobs, and social empowerment.

