

# Inequalities in the recycling sector in Romania

The informal recycling sector in Romania

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# Hello

i am Flaviu from the Local Development Group in Cluj,  
Romania

# The highlight

The poor are getting poorer

# To start with

The absence of the informal recycling sector in official and corporate narratives doesn't leave room for the social inclusion of the structurally oppressed.

# Field experience

Understanding the informal recycling sector in Bucharest

Interviews and observation - waste pickers (30) , scrap yards (8), EPR organizations, officials, end buyers

Legal analysis

Official reporting on recycling

# The context

EPR system is present in Romania for more than a decade

Producers and importers have created umbrella organizations to deal with recycling targets

Economic instruments used to incentivize recycling (tax applied on unreached targets)

Apparently system works well - targets are reached

# How does it really work?

EPR organizations invested in collection infrastructure

The packaging waste needs to be traced back to the population

Scrap yards can document the transactions of buying recyclables from the “population” and then sell the documentation that acknowledge the traceability

Apart from separate collection and source separation, buying traceability accounts for 90% of the targets

# Who is behind the traceable waste?

Around 1000 waste pickers estimated in Bucharest

who collect from apartment and office buildings, open markets, shops, street litterbins, parks and green areas

“Professionalized” waste pickers (10%) live out of this  
Full-timers (80%) and part-timers (10%) supplement  
other minimum income (pensions, social aids)

# The economics of it

Producers are charged 450 euro for each ton when not reaching targets

EPR pay 18/ton for buying traceability from scrap yards

The 18 euro doesn't even cover for labour costs associated with the process (60% of the time of a full timer)

20-30% of the recyclables are not traceable due to bureaucracy

# Who's benefiting

90% cost reduction for EPR

Additional income for scrap yards

No extras on buying prices

So, everybody except one category

# Is social innovation possible?

Probably

But co-creation and openness towards to informal sector is not sufficient given their long relationship with distrust and oppression

So,

How do we build trust?

# Perceptions now

State – no problem, no informal sector

Formal sector – competitors

Producers – thieves

Citizens – roma, alcoholics and homeless

# Structural vs. micro-social

Structural failures – marginalizing poverty, oppression of the vulnerable, benefiting the large capital, perpetuating and deepening inequality

Societal innovation – focused on human relations, centered around and embedded in micro-communities, using social creativity, create multi-actors relations, use participatory actions<

# A starting point

Networks and division of work in the high-rise buildings in Bucharest

Cleaning personnel in high-rise buildings operate sorting

Waste pickers with improvised carts pick-up and transport

Larger quantities provide better

# Taking it from here

There is a trust relationship between these actors

A safer environment behind the doors

The reach of the authorities and contracted operators is limited to the public space

Micro-communities are more likely to respond to their members and to social incentives

# So problem solved?

- Not really
- The official narrative should acknowledge the sector
- Social security and access to public services
- Awareness and co-participation of the community

# But

- Institutions are also reluctant to change and novelty
- Social transformation takes time and commitment
- Neoliberal practices are only interested in profit

# Concluding

Multi-actor collaboration networks

That allow to be transformed.

And building trust.

# Thank you

Let's talk.

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## Photo report - Bucharest street waste pickers



**Picture 1.** People queuing up at the recycling centre to valorize their work. 8-9 AM is the peak at the scrap yard, since people start collecting early in the morning and also bring the materials collected in the afternoon/evening of the previous day.



**Picture 2.** The quantity collected by a family of three (husband and wife and their daughter) in 6 hours. Mostly plastic, but also 1.5 kg of aluminium cans



**Picture 3.** Dan, 45, former house painter, earns around 5 euro/day by collecting PET and aluminium cans. He performs this activity for several years.



**Picture 4.** Aluminium cans deposit at a scrap yard



**Picture 5.** Improvized cart for transporting collected recyclables by a waste picker