

# Action research in Accra:

## Empowering Ghana's youth through waste

AFRICAN CITIES  
RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

Project brief



### What is the ACRC programme?

The African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) is a collaborative approach to tackling complex problems in the continent's rapidly changing cities. Funded by FCDO, it aims to generate robust insights and evidence that will help improve the living conditions, services and life chances of all city residents, particularly for disadvantaged communities.

Work in 12 African cities – including Accra – began in 2020, with foundation phase research focusing on generating a rich, nuanced understanding of the city. It combined a systems approach with political analysis to identify potential areas of reform in different contexts. To address the systemic nature of these challenges, ACRC focused on urban development domains, clustered around economic, built environment and societal issues, to go beyond sectoral silos and provide the potential to unlock reform.

Following this foundational phase, action research projects are now being devised to tackle priority issues identified during the initial phase. These are designed to generate evidence and foster coalitions of urban reformers, demonstrating the efficacy of collective approaches to resolving complex urban challenges in African cities.

This action research initiative, focusing on organising informal motorised waste operators in Accra, is one such project that aims to contribute to broader reform efforts in the city.

### What is this project about?

This action research project – Empowering Ghana's youth through waste: Organising informal motorised waste operators for decent work and inclusive urban services – is being implemented in two municipalities in Accra: Accra Metropolitan Assembly and Korley Klottey Municipal Assembly. It was developed through a participatory and consultative process with young people who are engaged in the informal waste sector in Accra, ensuring that their perspectives and needs are integral to the initiative.

The project aims to facilitate the organisation and unionisation of informal motorised waste operators in Accra, empowering them to formalise their operations, amplify their collective representation, and contribute meaningfully to the development of a decentralised and inclusive urban waste management system.

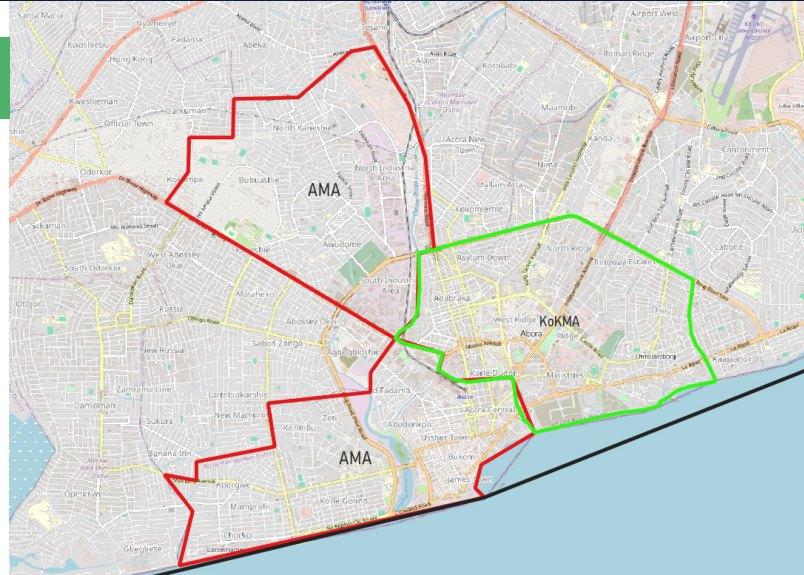
Ultimately, the project will seek to leverage this organisation and unionisation to boost employment within Accra's urban green sector and promote decent livelihoods for young people. The action research project takes a dual approach – using **advocacy** to organise and unionise the informal motorised operators, coupled with **capacity building** initiatives, which are designed to facilitate the formalisation of their operations.



## Who is involved?

The research project is an iterative process that involves state and non-state actors. State actors include the Parliament of Ghana and sub-national level actors, such as local authorities. Non-state actors include waste workers, academic researchers and the business community, acting together to co-design, co-create and co-implement the initiative.

It also involves working with the Borla Taxi and Tricycle Operators (BTTOs) and local authorities to unionise the BTTOs through cooperatives, and give them voice and representation as partners rather than fringe players in the city's waste management. Project implementation also involves unlocking the legal regime – at both national and local levels – for financing and contracting to include the BTTOs, as well as supporting them with the necessary structures to sustain their union/cooperatives. This calls for a dedicated spokesperson for BTTOs to be established, who can articulate the urban grassroots movement of informal waste workers and advocate for the demonopolisation and decentralisation of urban waste services.



The operators' accessibility, mobility and flexibility make them indispensable to this networked ecosystem of informal waste work. In addition, their economic and environmental impact, precarious working conditions, potential for integration into formal systems, and high visibility in public spaces underscore their importance. These factors, alongside their potential for scaling up inclusive urban waste management models, form the rationale for this action research focus, which is further elaborated below:

## Why focus on informal motorised waste operators?

This action research project recognises the diverse range of informal workers active in the waste service sector – including aggregators, recyclers, pickers, sorters and motorised waste collectors. But the primary focus on the BTTOs, or informal motorised waste operators, is due to the cascading nature of their role and how it supports other operational functions in the waste value chain.

For instance, the motorised tricycle operators play a pivotal role in supporting female sorters and value pickers, who often operate at the lowest rungs of the waste economy. These women depend on the services of motorised operators to transport their aggregated recyclables to buying centres across the city.

- 1. Potential to attract youth into the green economy** – The informal motorised waste sector holds significant potential to engage young people in environmentally sustainable livelihoods, by offering accessible, income-generating opportunities in waste collection and recycling.
- 2. Critical role in urban waste transport** – Motorised waste operators serve as a vital link in the urban waste management chain, particularly in areas underserved by formal waste collection systems. They provide door-to-door collection and transport services between households and dumpsites or recycling centres – especially in hard-to-reach informal settlements, inner-city neighbourhoods, and peri-urban zones where large waste trucks face accessibility challenges.



3. **High visibility and organisational potential** – This group is already highly visible, mobile and concentrated in key areas, making them easier to mobilise and unionise. Many of the waste workers belong to informal associations or have existing informal communication networks, which can serve as a foundation for formal unionisation.
4. **Economic and environmental impact** – The informal motorised waste operators contribute significantly to waste recovery and recycling, often collecting plastics, metals and organic waste for resale. Supporting this group therefore strengthens the circular economy and reduces pressure on dumpsites and landfills.
5. **Precarious working conditions** – Despite their importance, motorised waste workers face unsafe working conditions, police harassment, lack of legal recognition, and vulnerability to municipal regulations and crackdowns. They also bear the full costs and health risks associated with their activities, with little to no support or social protection.
6. **Potential to decentralise services** – Motorised waste services offer a model for decentralised waste collection that is flexible, cost effective and scalable. With support, informal operators could be licensed and integrated into local waste plans, allowing metropolitan assemblies to deliver better service coverage.



## What are the expected outcomes?

The initiative seeks to achieve three main outcomes:

1. **Foster the organisation, formalisation and capacity building of informal motorised waste operatives.** This includes supporting their integration into associations and cooperatives to help enhance the sector's appeal and generate employment opportunities in the green economy for young people. A unionised collective of motorised waste operators could advocate more effectively for policy inclusion, access to designated collection zones, financial support (such as fuel subsidies or microloans) and recognition as essential service providers. This will lay the groundwork to engage young people in environmentally sustainable livelihoods, by offering accessible, income-generating opportunities in waste collection and recycling.
2. **Highlight the integral role of informal waste actors within the waste management value chain.** This will include running public awareness and advocacy campaigns, with a view to promoting equity and fairness within the waste management system. The project will also facilitate multistakeholder policy dialogues with key municipal and national government agencies, with the aim of catalysing policy reforms in the sector. These agencies will include the Ministry for Local Government, Chieftaincy and Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources, Regional Coordinating Council (RCC), Environmental Protection Agency, and Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies (MMDAs).
3. **Build the capacities of city authorities.** The project will enhance the existing capabilities of the Waste Management Departments at the Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) and Korley Klottey Municipal Assembly, through targeted training and strategic planning initiatives. These will focus on building stakeholder engagement skills and supporting requisite mindset and practice shifts, to facilitate the integration of informal waste workers into the city's waste management framework.

## What is the overarching objective?

The overarching goal of the project is to catalyse a redistributed solid waste management regime, which supports inclusive urban service delivery while creating a level playing field for all players. This involves a critical examination of the existing byelaws and regulatory frameworks governing municipal solid waste management, particularly regarding contracting and service provision. By examining these legal and institutional arrangements, the study will identify opportunities for integrating informal motorised waste operators into a more equitable and participatory waste management framework, enhancing the creation of green, decent and attractive employment opportunities for young people within the waste management sector.





## About this project brief

This is an overview of an action research project being implemented in Accra. All information was correct at the time of production (April 2026).

[Read more about ACRC's research in Accra](#)

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