

Case Study: Solid Waste Management in the DRC

Background

The Sida-funded Sustainable National Societies and Resilient Communities (SNSRC) project, implemented by the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC Red Cross) with support from the Swedish Red Cross, was carried out in Kinshasa province between 2022 and 2025.

Targeting approximately 112,000 people, the project aimed to strengthen individual and community resilience, social cohesion, and empowerment through participation and local action for sustainable change, while supporting strong Red Cross branches capable of mobilizing communities and volunteers for sustainable change.

Solid Waste Management (SWM) was a core component of these efforts, with a strong focus on improving knowledge and changing behaviours of proper waste management at household and community levels.



Volunteers taking collected plastic bottles to the stock site. Credit: DRC Red Cross

Context: how did communities manage their solid waste?

Prior to the project, SWM practices in the target communities were largely informal and inconsistent. Public waste management infrastructure was insufficient, with limited public bins, inadequate landfill and dumpster capacity, and no municipal waste collection system. As a result, household waste was often dumped in open spaces and drainage channels or burned, including plastic waste. These challenges were compounded by limited awareness of waste segregation, weak engagement between communities and local authorities, and the absence of structured community governance mechanisms.

Challenges



Challenging environmental context:

The project operated in a difficult environmental context, with high water tables and flood risks near riverbanks increasing the likelihood of waste contaminating drainage systems, ecosystems, and water sources, and contributing to disease vectors.



Limited waste management infrastructure:

The project faced challenges due to the limited availability of landfills and dumpsters near to the population, absence of waste containers, lack of public waste collection systems and insufficient private waste collection services, and poorly maintained drainage systems, with plastic waste frequently causing blockages. This increased public health and risks of environmental degradation in the area.

Solutions



Community-led and context specific approaches:

In response, resources were redirected toward hygiene awareness-raising and prevention of waterborne diseases through household visits and community sessions. This allowed sanitation risks to be addressed in a context-appropriate manner.



Advocacy with local government and community actors:

The project supported advocacy efforts with local authorities and WWF to improve waste management infrastructure and services in the area. This helped raise awareness and prioritization of community needs and continues to contribute to gradual improvements in waste management resources.

Successes

- **Improved waste management:** Households increasingly practice waste separation, marking a shift from previously informal and inconsistent disposal methods. This was achieved through regular home visits and hygiene promotion sessions led by trained volunteers. Using simple, repeated messaging and practical demonstrations, volunteers encouraged households to separate plastic from other waste. Structured guidelines and communication techniques ensured consistent messaging. Behavior change is ongoing, but adoption is steadily increasing.
- **Plastic recycling:** Plastic recycling has become common practice in the target communities. This was made possible through partnership with the recycling company KINTOKO, which purchases plastic waste collected by community members. Because it is done at scale, the initiative reduces environmental waste while also generating additional income for the Red Cross sub-branch at the neighborhood level.
- **Advocacy:** The Nsola community successfully secured public land for waste disposal and access to a public borehole for clean drinking water from local authorities. This was achieved through organized meetings between community leaders, DRCRC volunteers, and local authorities. DRCRC was key in facilitating dialogue and building trust. The process strengthened community participation and collective action.
- **Strong community ownership:** Community members now actively lead waste management activities and plans. These include cleaning drainage systems, promoting waste separation, disinfection of spaces after flooding, and conducting awareness sessions in schools, churches and markets. Volunteers used participatory approaches to encourage local involvement. Behavior change required continuous engagement and trust-building. Over time, activities shifted from externally driven to community-led initiatives.



Public spraying after flooding.
Credit: DRC Red Cross

Lessons Learned



Behaviour change approaches to solid waste management can be effective when supported by trusted community volunteers, regular household visits, and practical, actionable solutions, particularly when income-generating, even at a low return. Repeated engagement, simple messaging and demonstrations help shift awareness into practice. Involving schools and community leaders increase acceptance and reinforce practices.



Advocacy can deliver concrete, local results when supported by organized dialogue and strong community leadership. However, scaling and sustaining these outcomes requires stronger engagement at municipal and provincial levels. The involvement of local authorities was critical in achieving initial successes. Future efforts should strengthen these linkages and wider partner coordination to ensure wider replication and sustainability.



The community creating their advocacy plan.
Credit: DRC Red Cross



Door to door sensitization and gathering feedback from community members. Credit: DRC Red Cross

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