



# Organized Waste pickers as environmental educators: peer-to-peer and bottom-up generated knowledge informing public policy



Capacity building activity with cooperative members at Avemare / Photo: Jutta Gutberlet



Team of Environmental Promoters dedicated exclusively to community awareness building  
Photo: Jovenes en Progreso

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## Executive summary

Waste pickers<sup>1</sup> are organizing in member-based organizations and as such are increasingly being integrated in waste management systems. In some countries (such as Argentina, Brazil, Nicaragua) they have achieved formal recognition as environmental service providers that conduct door-to-door collection of recyclables, participate in educational activities at schools and contribute to the clean-ups from littering, improving overall environmental health. Yet, most cities are far away from such an inclusive and sustainable waste management model and waste pickers still suffer from stigma and exclusion. Our research shows that cities can successfully work in collaboration with waste picker organizations, benefiting the community with education for better resource recovery (recycling) programs and improving the overall environmental conditions. It is central to recognize that waste pickers can become the environmental ambassadors in their communities, advocating for zero waste, reuse and recycling, diminishing problems with littering, contamination and water logging. Their commitment to recycling, waste collection and disposal sensitizes the community for best practices in waste management. Networking activities among waste pickers promote peer-to-peer learning that also helps them become better environmental educators. It ultimately takes an innovative local government to invite the accumulated knowledge from waste pickers into policy making to promote the desired shift towards more sustainable and inclusive waste governance.

<sup>1</sup>Waste pickers is used to also include small scale waste actors involved in door-to-door waste collection and disposal.

## Introduction

Waste pickers are everywhere, although not always visible. In most parts of the world waste pickers have created member-based organizations such as cooperatives, associations, federations or networks and waste actors organize in small enterprises. The Recycling Networks & Waste Governance research project examined the role waste pickers play as environmental stewards and identified some of the challenges they encounter during their everyday work.

Our findings support arguments in favour of inclusive forms of waste governance, pointing towards the important educational mission waste pickers engage in, besides collecting, sorting and redirecting recyclables into the circular economy. Particularly through their door-to-door waste collection, waste pickers closely work with households and businesses, providing important instructions on how to improve source separation, reducing waste reaching the landfills and, ultimately recovering more resources



Different groups of waste pickers discuss the topic waste and educate about waste management in different ways, for example based on pride for their organization or movement, or based on the importance of clean separation at the source for recycling and to sustain their livelihoods, or to reduce resource extraction and diminish the contamination of the environment by encouraging correct waste disposal (reducing plastic waste in oceans, lakes and waterways). Waste pickers use different educational practices as strategies to expose citizens – as well as policy makers- to

the consequences of their waste and to create an understanding of waste as a resource. Also waste pickers themselves become transformed through grassroots social learning, particularly peer-to-peer learning and have become environmental stewards and insurgent citizens defending reuse, zero waste, the circular economy, social control of infrastructure policies and solidarity economy. Through their learning and educational activities, waste pickers are important in building sustainable communities and cities, as well as in producing new knowledge for better waste governance.

## Methodology

The study is empirically informed by the Recycling Networks & Waste Governance international research project, that examines waste governance and grassroots innovations developed by waste picker organizations and networks in Buenos Aires (Argentina), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Kisumu (Kenya), Managua (Nicaragua), Montreal, Vancouver (Canada) and São Paulo (Brazil). The research team conducted a survey with more than 100 WPOs in the involved countries. The survey examined the history and characteristics of the initiatives, their governance structures, funding and equipment situations, types of work conducted, characteristics of the workers and their working conditions, network relations, and the challenges and innovations of the WPOs. The study also included 100 in-depth interviews with a selection of WPO members, as well as with key informants in local governments and other waste governance actors. At two interna-

tional workshops held in Kenya (2018) and Tanzania (2019), the findings were analyzed and discussed by researchers and WPO representatives from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Kenya Nicaragua, Sweden and Tanzania, and also by Kenyan and Tanzanian municipal officers and politicians working with environmental and waste management. The purpose of these workshops was to co-create knowledge and to conceptualize solutions and policy recommendations (see reports: Azevedo et al., 2018 and Goodluck et al., 2019). For this policy brief data specifically related to the roles and goals of waste pickers and their environmental education interventions was analysed. We asked them specifically about their educational roles and about the impacts and challenges they had experienced as environmental stewards. Our observations and interview data were tabulated and analysed to find key themes and unique experiences.

## Research, results and conclusions

Waste pickers make significant contributions to our society and to the environment and climate, and to our society at large, as innovative environmental educators. The integration of stewardship considerations into local waste management programs is crucial to achieving better waste management results, in line with zero waste aims and climate change reduction goals. In all six case study cities included in our research we found that waste pickers bring important assets to the city waste system. Their everyday experiences and continuous peer-to-peer learnings make them waste experts and the routine of door-to-door household waste collection establishes essential links between the community and the waste management system, to improve the recovery of recyclable materials.

Our research demonstrates how waste pickers who have historically been excluded and stigmatized, are speaking up (e.g., against waste incineration in São Paulo and Buenos Aires) and reinvent themselves as environmental ambassadors, and are taking up roles in environmental education. Cities should include the valuable knowledge waste pickers have accumulated through their everyday praxis to improve their waste system. The outreach of waste

pickers into the community at the household level is important when it comes to re-educating the population towards the need for household waste management and a clean environment, source separation and recycling as well as for consumption reduction and reuse. Often this is done through clean ups, as a demonstration marketing tool to show the need and impact of waste management. Door-to-door collection of waste by small-scale waste entrepreneurs in Kisumu have transformed informal neighborhoods, providing a service where there was none before. Door-to-door recycling collection in some municipalities in the metropolitan region of São Paulo has fostered the community's engagement in clean source separation, reducing waste.

The experience and understandings accumulated by waste pickers throughout their life, can also allow for proposals that support other forms of interventions in waste management (e.g., repair, refurbishing, reuse) to benefit the urban environment, creating more sustainable cities. All these factors signal that cities have increasing opportunities to improve their waste systems by including the valuable knowledge waste pickers have accumulated through their everyday praxis. Still, in order to harness the



potential contributions of waste pickers, governments need to appreciate and formally recognize them, invest in strengthening WPOs, and build the capacity of their members to further improve and expand, for example, separated material collection. Local businesses and industries should also be involved as key stakeholders in the process of improving resource recovery, particularly by stimulating reverse logistics programs and by expanding corporate environmental education programs.

An outstanding example for successful collaborations between waste pickers and the local government is the cooperative Avemare in Santana de Parnaíba, Brazil. In Argentina and Brazil various cases also highlight the benefits from partnerships of WPOs and local industries. In these examples waste pickers are recognized as key stakeholders in the process of improving resource recovery, particularly by stimulating reverse logistics programs and by expanding environmental education programs. In Buenos Aires, the waste picker cooperative Reciclando Sueños has generated significant savings to a large waste generator, after having conducted a waste assessment and integrated educational outreach activities, involving factory workers. Waste pickers are important actors that address some of the most pressing waste related urban issues, while at the same time promoting social inclusion. Working relationships between waste pickers and local governments that are supported by recognition letters, licenses and/or signed contracts are necessary to provide legal backing and security to waste picker groups. Our research concludes with a demand for policy reform, that reflect and respond to the following key points.

- In many cities around the world, waste pickers have created functioning member-based organizations or networks, through which they perform regular selective household waste collection and specific collections with industries, for recycling.

## Policy recommendations

**Inclusive dialogue for mutual learning:** There is a clear demand for a paradigm shift in how waste pickers are perceived by the public. Such a transition requires innovative policy changes and a participatory governance approach including the views from all stakeholders: governments, policy makers, business communities, industries and waste pickers. New opportunities for dialogue and interaction are required and an active listening to waste pickers' perspectives on waste management is a prerequisite for positive change and for developing an inclusive waste management agenda. Local governments need to sit down with waste pickers planning for educational interventions.

**Indicators:** 1. Regular planned dialogue with waste picker groups and other key stakeholders, 2. Regular and transparent reporting (taking minutes of the meetings and decisions taken). 3. Launching of documents such as waste manage-

- Particularly when conducting door-to-door collection at the household level waste pickers have the potential and capacity to act as environmental ambassadors. Waste pickers establish a rapport with their clients (households, industries) with whom they communicate regularly, informing about best waste separation strategies or the recyclability of certain packaging. We observed these practices in several cities in the metropolitan region of São Paulo and Buenos Aires, as well as among the waste collectors in Kisumu.
- Everyday experiences and peer-to-peer learning through workshops, seminars or meetings, have shaped waste pickers into waste experts and this know-how can be harnessed by the local government to significantly improve the city's waste system.
- Waste pickers are directly interested in better source separation, since this enhances their separation/ recycling activities and income from commercialization. The more waste is diverted to waste pickers, the less municipalities have to spend on waste services such as transport and landfilling. Thus, both parties' interests are convergent.
- Waste pickers can become leaders in grassroots learning and environmental education activities transforming local waste practices in diverse communities; e.g., when waste pickers speak at schools or public events.
- Social and economic exclusion, marginalization and stigmatization are still the major barriers in recognizing and making use of the contributions of waste pickers.
- Transforming waste pickers into environmental service providers and innovators, contributes to creating more sustainable cities.

ment plans for public consultation; 4. Regular presentation of accountability documents to the community (reports on inputs, outputs and outcomes).

**Assessing the needs:** To better understand the current circumstances of the waste picker population and to harness their potential as environmental educators, needs assessments should be conducted, which will then inform the next steps to formally integrate waste pickers into the city's waste management system.

**Indicators:** 1. Community-based assessments to find out more about local needs. 2. Participation of waste pickers in participatory budgeting, planning and other forms of private public partnership meetings, where they can express and address their needs.



## Further readings

- Azevedo, A. M. M. de; Carenzo, S.; Goodluck, C.; Gutberlet, J.; Kain, J.-H.; Oloko, M. O.; Pérez Reynosa, J.; Zapata, P. & Zapata Campos, M. J. (2018) Inclusive waste governance and grassroots innovations for social, environmental and economic change: Report on first research outcomes of the project Recycling Networks & Waste Governance. Swedish Research Council (n° 2016-06289) and Canada Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (n° 890-2016-0098). In collaboration with WIEGO. ISBN 978-91-984547-3-4.

<http://www.wiego.org/reports/inclusive-waste-governance-and-grassroots-innovations-social-environmental-and-economic-chan>

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**Positive attitude:** Waste pickers experience violence and oppression on an every-day magnitude. It is pivotal for government officials and law enforcement officers to shift their behaviors and attitudes towards waste pickers and to appreciate them for what they are: environmental ambassadors and providers of valuable waste recovery services.

**Indicators:** 1. Billboards and other media communication materials highlighting the importance of waste pickers, 2. Regular community clean-up activities run by waste pickers, 3. Number of memberships to waste collection services to evaluate the success of the service provision by WPOs, 4. Revision of practices and by-laws that oppress and discriminate against waste pickers as it happens in many cities.

**Peer-to-peer learning:** Leaders among the waste pickers have the capacity to become powerful major agents for change (they are found primarily among youth and women). Through their networks, they can share their experiences in environmental education widely with other waste pickers, as peer-to-peer learning.

**Indicators:** 1. Allocated funding/support to waste picker networks and their social movements, and their peer-to-peer learning activities, 2. Support of regional/national meetings of waste pickers. 3. Number of exchanges and visits among different WPOs.

**Government direct and indirect support in educational outreach:** Waste pickers represent a segment of city population that is commonly excluded by the government. They need to be recognized as valuable assets in delivering educational and communicational public programs and campaigns. Relevant government departments need to change their perception of waste pickers towards supporting their activities, to upscale and increase the benefits of waste pickers' activities.

**Indicators:** 1. Creation of local working groups with relevant government departments, waste pickers and other key stakeholders to design educational programs that involve waste pickers, to improve source separation and waste reduction, 2. Creation of contracts, licenses and other forms of recognition of the services provided by waste pickers, 3. Funding and support directed to waste pickers, specially from private large generators (avoiding big business to "free ride" on public policy).

**Policy changes:** Participatory waste governance means working at multiple levels and working with community and with waste pickers and their organizations. Public policies and legal frameworks should promote educational interventions that are centered on waste avoidance, resource recovery, reuse and recycling. Revenues to pay for the services of waste pickers can be collected through refund systems (for specific packaging like bottles and cans), stewardship programs, reverse logistics or service contracts with cities for the collection of recyclables. Ultimately waste pickers need to be rewarded for the multiple services they provide in educating the public, collecting, sorting and redirecting recyclables into the circular economy.

**Indicators:** 1. Policy documents supporting waste picker activities, 2. Policy to enforce waste collection by waste actors and selective waste collection by waste pickers, 3. Incentives and education to households for better source separation of waste.

**Environmental health:** As an example, waste pickers at large can become our number one recognized (and remunerated) agent collecting plastic waste, avoiding plastic waste from entering waterways and oceans. There are large numbers of waste pickers in every country in the global South that, if trained and adequately supported, can take on the very onerous job of helping us fix this and other serious problems linked to waste management.

**Indicators:** 1. Training sessions by departments of public health and social services, 2. Renumeration programs for recycling of diverse types of plastic waste, especially those with little commercial value.

## Research team

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