

Chapter 2: Waste Pickers are Organising!

As the profile of Jimmy Refes Cañas in Chapter 1 demonstrates, some waste pickers make conscious decisions not to form formal organisations. However, many other waste pickers around the world are organising. Some waste picker organisations date back more than forty years. For example, in Colombia, which has one of the oldest waste picker co-operative movements in the world, the *Cooperativa Antioqueña de Recolectores de Subproductos* was formed in the city of Medellín in 1962 (Medina 2007, 80,155). In many other countries, organising of waste pickers has gained momentum in recent years.

Waste pickers have chosen to organise in many different ways. Some factors that influence the forms of organisations adopted by different groups of waste pickers include:

- Their political orientation and objectives – for example, groups that are more interested in negotiating collective rights may choose to form unions, whilst those focused on delivering services may be more drawn to co-operatives or companies
- The political orientation and objectives of NGOs, church organisations, donors and other outside structures that frequently play a key role in facilitating the organising of waste pickers
- Whether they see themselves as workers or entrepreneurs, or in some other role
- The local legislative context, which may prohibit the formation of certain types of organisations and/or make it easier to form others
- The pre-existence of particular kinds of waste picker organisations and networks at the local, regional and national level that serve as models and provide support for the formation of new organisations
- The existence of a regional or national network of waste picker organisations that proactively seeks to facilitate the formation of similar kinds of organisations.

However, there are no factors that can predetermine the exact form of particular waste picker organisations. Ultimately the decision is profoundly political, and even within the same city different groups of waste pickers can decide to form different kinds of organisations. The same group of waste pickers may also decide to form more than one organisation in order to help them pursue different goals. For example, the Indian trade unions KKP and SEWA, which focus on mobilising for collective rights, have both formed co-operatives for the purpose of service delivery.

This chapter provides overviews of a number of different waste picker organisations, including associations, co-operatives, trade unions and companies. It is important to note that even two organisations that both call themselves unions, co-operatives or businesses can have very different orientations, structures, guiding

principles and goals. Rather than trying to identify ‘typical features’ of different kinds of organisations, this chapter seeks to explore why particular groups of waste pickers have chosen to organise themselves in the ways that they have, to provide some insight into the functioning of the different organisations and to give a sense of the wide range of organisations formed by waste pickers.

Some questions to think about when reading this chapter are:

- What are the similarities and differences between the different organisations profiled in this chapter?
- What role do outside organisations play in organising waste pickers? How do the agendas of these outside organisations affect the ways in which particular groups of waste pickers organise?
- How does the form of organisation chosen by different groups of waste pickers relate to their goals and activities?
- Does the form of organisation affect the kinds of goals and activities that can be pursued by the waste pickers?
- What are some of the key factors affecting how waste pickers organise?
- How can organising both entrench and transform gender inequalities?
- What challenges are faced by waste pickers in gaining recognition for their organisations?

Ankara Recycling Association (Kooperatif Yolunda Ankara Gerikazanım Derneği), Turkey by *Leslie Tuttle*¹⁰

The waste pickers of Ankara began organising in response to violent action taken against them in 2004 by municipal officials. Primarily collectors of paper, they were using an empty city lot as an open air ‘warehouse’ to store what they collected. When they ignored the municipality’s demand that they move, the city set fire to their ‘warehouse’, burning their inventory, the structures that separated each family’s goods and the makeshift dwellings that single men had built. To add insult to injury, many of the pushcarts they used were also lost in the fire. The waste pickers could not go back to work until they could afford new carts.

This destruction had a major impact on the 200 to 300 families in the Türközü neighbourhood who relied heavily on waste picking for their survival. Ironically, the press blamed the action on the ‘Kurds’, a minority group to which most of the waste pickers belong. Such ‘double discrimination’ is not unusual; as the most recent group of urban immigrants they were targeted both economically and socially.

Realising that they could not fight violence with violence, the waste pickers began organising. At first they struggled to do so on their own, but later they were assisted by a group of young professionals involved in human rights work whom they had approached for legal assistance after the fire. The professionals proposed that the waste pickers enter into the World Bank Development Marketplace Contest in order

¹⁰ This story is based on an interview conducted with Hamit Temel on March 1, 2008 by Leslie Tuttle with translation assistance from Eloise Dhuy. Additional information was provided by Eloise Dhuy.

to receive support to form a co-operative. In a series of meetings the waste pickers discussed the idea and eventually agreed to participate in the contest. As there was no formal organisation at the time, the competition was entered under the name of the project writers. The group won US\$10,000 to help establish a co-operative. Because this was the first project of its kind in Turkey, and since municipal actors were not ready to support such a project, it was decided to start organising under an association as the first step towards creating a co-operative.¹¹

The association was formed in June 2005 by seven people – one waste picker (Hamit Temel), three social workers, two urban specialists and one unionist. More clashes with the municipality fuelled another ‘fire’ in the press. This helped strengthen the waste pickers’ resolve and earned them public support.



Hamit Temel, President of the Ankara Recycling Association, at the press conference

(photo by Eloise Dhuy)

In January 2006 the first elections were held to choose a council and president for the *Kooperatif Yolunda Ankara Gerikazanım Derneği*¹² or Ankara Recycling Association. The association is now composed entirely of waste pickers and is in the process of building a community solidarity association that will provide social support, helping students succeed in school and putting up a building for meetings and communal meals.

The association has experienced challenges regarding sustainability as it invested in small premises but has not been able to gather enough member fees to cover the expenses. Even though the premises are located in the heart of the Türközü district, waste pickers have not made much use of them. The main problem experienced by the association is a lack of human investment, as the members have their own work and families to handle.¹³

¹¹ Information provided via personal communication with Eloise Dhuy.

¹² The members prefer the term ‘geri kazanım’, which means recovering to ‘geri dönüşüm’ which means recycling as ‘geri kazanım’ also means ‘advantage’, ‘recovery’ and ‘win’, which helps to motivate them in their work and their organising.

¹³ Information provided via personal communication with Eloise Dhuy.

While the association builds internal strength, the struggles continue. Many waste pickers are still beaten regularly and conflicts over solid waste management abound as others compete for control of materials and contracts. Association members, however, have had an opportunity to raise their voices against violence during a press conference held in June of 2007 where Hamit Temel, as President, was their spokesperson.

Now the Ankara Recycling Association is looking for new ways to gain visibility, perhaps by aligning with other NGOs or becoming the subject of a field study. Hamit views his participation in the First World Conference of Waste Pickers in Colombia as a key learning experience. He now has increased confidence to face the challenges ahead.

NIDAN *Swachdhara* Private Ltd – Forming a Company with Waste Pickers in India by Arbind Singh and Rakesh Saran, NIDAN

The NGO NIDAN was formed in 1996 to support the working poor involved in the informal sector in India. NIDAN seeks to raise aspirations, build structures owned and controlled by the poor, and to help make credit, insurance, technology and the market accessible to them to enhance their bargaining power in the market. NIDAN works in Bihar, Jharkhand, Delhi and Rajasthan.

After piloting door-to-door garbage collection by *safai mitras*¹⁴ NIDAN decided to create a registered institution which could help in providing regular and dignified work to thousands of *safai mitras* involved in dirty work like the collection of rags. Initially NIDAN decided to form a co-operative with the name of *Swachhdhara swalambi sahkari samiti*. However, after more than two years of hard work NIDAN was not successful in registering the co-operative. According to the co-operative registration office it could not register the co-operative as the *safai mitras* do not have permanent addresses or proof of address and so could not be executive committee members. Lack of literacy and basic education was also raised as a hurdle to prevent NIDAN from registering the co-operative.

NIDAN therefore started exploring other forms of organisation. Even though the development sector has largely focused on creating co-operatives or societies, NIDAN was informed that a company was better suited to this situation. Some of the advantages of being structured as a company include the fact that a company can work in the whole of India; bankers feel comfortable in dealing with companies; the workers are proud to be owners of a company; and as a company is for profit, the profits can be distributed easily. Municipal entities have also shown a shift towards using registered companies in their waste management systems, as they feel that only waste management companies can solve their waste problems. All of these reasons encouraged NIDAN to register as a company rather than as a co-operative.

¹⁴ *Safai mitra* is the term that is used in Nidan to refer to people who pick rags, do door-to-door collection and collect recyclables. *Safai mitra* can be translated into English as “a friend who keeps our locality clean”. As people who do this work are traditionally looked down on and discriminated against, this term was chosen to give dignity to their work and help to improve their status in society.

The company NIDAN *Swachdhara* Private Ltd was registered in 2008. It is governed by a board of eleven directors, seven of whom are *safai mitras* elected on an annual basis. Currently two of the *safai mitra* directors are women. The seven *safai mitras* who are board members represent hundreds of other *safai mitras* when the board takes decisions on key issues such as recruitment of waste pickers from new areas; incentives and other benefits like social security; applying for tenders in new cities; and expanding the work of the company. *Safai mitras* are further involved in the running of the company as shareholders; each *safai mitra* who works for NIDAN *Swachdhara* Private Ltd owns one share in the company. Two per cent of the shares are owned by the Director, 18% are owned by the managing director, and the two other non-*safai mitra* directors each own 0.2% of the shares. The *safai mitras* who are directors each own 1.8% of the shares, and the 500 *safai mitras* who are employed by the company own approximately 80% of the shares.

NIDAN *Swachdhara* Private Ltd currently has five contracts in three municipalities. 400 *safai mitras* are employed to provide services to 68,000 households. Those who collect waste from households work independently. Those who work on the pickup van work in teams of four. *Safai mitras* employed to work on open drainage, vermin compost or at the sorting centre work in pairs. The transition from working independently to being employed to work on contracts by NIDAN *Swachdhara* Private Ltd has created a number of challenges for the *safai mitras*. For the first time, they have to achieve externally defined targets and their work is monitored. In addition, instead of earning money whenever they decide to sell their materials, they now need to wait until they are paid their wages.

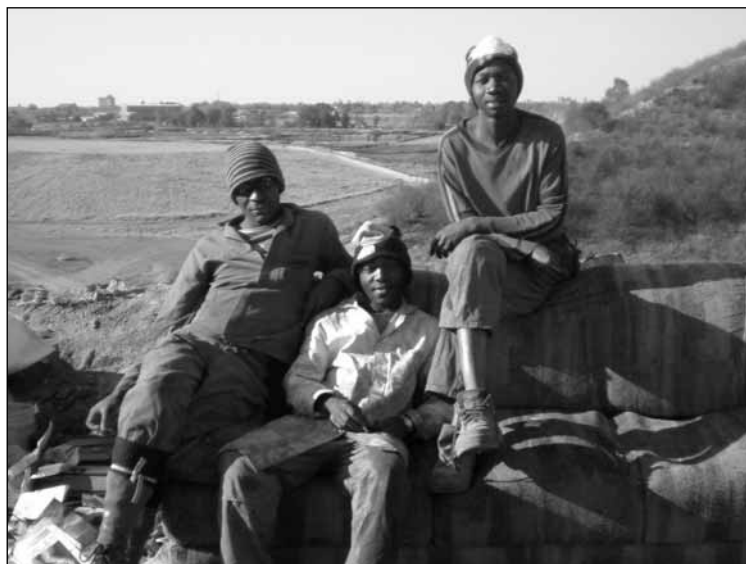


(Picture courtesy of NIDAN)

Overall incomes have improved as a result of employment by the company. In the past, *safai mitras* earned approximately Rs1500 (US\$33.33) per month. Now each *safai mitra* is paid a monthly salary of Rs2000 (US\$44.44). In addition, they earn between Rs1200 (US\$26.67) and Rs1800 (US\$45) per month from the sale of recyclables. They are therefore earning significantly more than the government minimum wage of

Rs2300 per month. All *safai mitras* are covered under a micro-insurance policy that covers health, accident and death. Every employee receives health coverage up to Rs6000 (US\$150) annually on submission of medical bills, and on death the family receives Rs3000 (US\$75). They do not work on Sundays and national holidays, and they receive health check-ups from government doctors.

The Ikageng Ditamating Recycling and Waste Management Group, Metsimaholo, South Africa by *Melanie Samson*¹⁵



Members of Ditamating

(photo by Melanie Samson)

The reclaimers from the Sasolburg dump in Metsimaholo, South Africa formed the *Ikageng Ditamating* Recycling and Waste Management Group in mid-2009. This co-operative unites all of the reclaimers on the dump. Its formation was the result of hard work and intensive organising activities that focused on overcoming historical divides between the young Sotho men who collected scrap metal and the older Sotho men and women who collected paper, plastics and glass.

Reclaimers have been working on the Sasolburg dump since the 1980s. For as long as anyone can remember, the local council has granted a string of private companies the right to extract all recyclable materials from the dump. However, this was never strictly enforced as the dump was not fenced and so the reclaimers could sneak materials off to sell to other buyers. In 2004 the company that held the contract

¹⁵ This story is based on research conducted for the NGO groundWork in September 2008, with additional interviews conducted with Simon Mbata and Maki Ramotsidisi on July 2 and 3, 2009. For more information on the original case study please see Samson (2008), which is available at www.groundwork.org.za/Publications/Reclaiming%20Livelihoods.pdf

abandoned its operations three years into a five-year contract. This left the reclaimers unofficially in charge of reclamation activities at the dump, and they began to negotiate the direct sale of their materials to the largest purchasers in the region.

The reclaimers aspired to formalise their place within the waste management system. They claim that during this period they were told by a manager in the municipality that if they wanted to receive the contract they would have to form a collective. There were long-standing tensions between the women and older men who collected paper, plastics and cardboard, and the young men who collected scrap metal – the older men and women alleged that the young men were ill-disciplined and disrespectful and that they poached materials from their elders. As a result, they did not invite the young men to join them when they formed the *Ikageng*¹⁶ Landfill Committee. The young men subsequently formed the *Ditamating*¹⁷ Scrap Metal Association. Both groups registered as closed corporations. The two separate organisations co-existed on the dump and there was little co-operation or communication between them.

The municipal officials deny that the reclaimers were organised during this period or indicated an interest in obtaining the contract. But the officials do note that the reclaimers were neither informed nor consulted when a new contract was awarded without having been advertised or put out for public tender. The contract was given to two black professionals who had no real experience in recycling. The city called it black economic empowerment. The reclaimers called it unfair and discriminatory. Given that they are also black, they could not understand why the contract should go to professionals who worked in schools and offices instead of to the people who actually did the work. After an extended battle in which the dump was fenced off and the police were called in to remove the reclaimers from the site, the reclaimers finally ‘surrendered’ and signed contracts agreeing to only sell their materials to the black empowerment company. The company forced them to sell individually, breaking the unity amongst the metal reclaimers who had previously sold their goods collectively. It then sold to the same buyers that the reclaimers had directly supplied their goods to in the past. As the company took a cut for itself, this meant that there was a significant drop in the prices received by the reclaimers.

When it became clear that the company did not have the financial and technical capacity to run the operations at the dump, it partnered with an established white-owned company. By October 2009, however, internal divisions had emerged between the two companies, and they subsequently abandoned operations at the dump. The space was re-opened for the reclaimers to mobilise and demand the contract. However, Simon Mbata, the leader of *Ditamating*, realised that it would be impossible to achieve this goal as long as the reclaimers remained divided into two separate groups. The previous contractor had played the two groups off against each other. Simon was convinced that the municipality would continue to do the same, and that it would

¹⁶ *Ikageng* means ‘build ourselves’ in seSotho.

¹⁷ *Ditamating* means ‘place of tomatoes’ in seSotho. The committee picked this name as it is the nickname for Sasolburg due to the large number of tomatoes grown in the area. They said that choosing this name would help to ensure that the committee is seen as a local initiative.

use the divisions between the reclaimers to justify not granting them the contract. According to Simon, an exchange trip to India where he saw waste picker groups successfully implementing separation at source, and other innovative practices that the Sasolburg reclaimers had only dreamed of, convinced him of the importance of uniting the reclaimers on his dump. He returned to South Africa firmly committed to achieving this goal.

Simon began by rebuilding the solidarity between the members of *Ditamating* that had been broken by the contractors. He met with the young men individually and convened weekly meetings. The metal reclaimers began to work as a collective once again, pooling the materials that they retrieved and selling them together to obtain higher prices. As in the past, they decided to share the profits equally. Simon convinced the members that they would only be able to win the contract to manage recycling at the dump if they joined with the members of *Ikageng* and presented the municipality with a united front. Once *Ditamating* was consolidated, the members initiated a campaign to convince *Ikageng* to merge with them. At first they focused on meeting with the *Ikageng* members one by one. Simon reports that many days he would travel to the dump and spend the whole day talking to people without working. Eventually three women saw the wisdom in uniting and began to attend the weekly meetings. However, *Ditamating* decided that the women could not join as individuals as they did not want to undermine *Ikageng* as an organisation. The three women responded by beginning to play an active role in reaching out to the other members of *Ikageng*.

After five months of intensive organising work, joint meetings were convened between the two groups. Two key issues that needed to be addressed were the division of work and the name of a new organisation. *Ikageng* members were hesitant to unite with the *Ditamating* as in the past the young men had prevented them from collecting metal. It was agreed that when they formed a common organisation all reclaimers would be able to collect all materials. Because they would share the profits equally there would also be no reason for the young men to stop the women and older men from accessing the more valuable metals. With respect to the name, as neither group wanted to forfeit their history and identity, they decided that the organisation would be called the *Ikageng Ditamating Recycling and Waste Management Group*.

Currently, forty-nine reclaimers are members of *Ikageng Ditamating*. It is officially registered as a co-operative and is governed by a committee made up of four women previously from *Ikageng* and four men previously from *Ditamating*. The members of the co-operative are divided into two groups. One group collects materials and the other sorts them. All members must clock in and out with the co-operative's secretary. Profits are shared equally based on the number of days that each person works. In its first two weeks of operation the co-operative earned R37,000 (US\$4,625). Since then it has managed to earn up to R51,000 (US\$6,375) in a fortnight.

The members of *Ikageng Ditamating* have made enormous strides in a short period of time. They have managed to overcome previously entrenched divisions of labour based on gender and age, have united the reclaimers into a collective organisation,

and increased their income. According to Maki Ramotsidisi, the Secretary of the co-operative and a former member of *Ikageng*, now that they are working co-operatively, animosity between the two former groups has subsided and all members of the co-operative work well together. It is, however, unlikely that all power relations related to gender, age and other social divisions could be so quickly overcome on a permanent basis. It will be important for *Ikageng Ditamating* to continue to identify and address inequalities within the organisation.

Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the waste pickers relates to their status within the city's waste management system. They still do not have the formal contract to recycle materials at the dump and live under constant threat that the municipality will once again grant the contract to outsiders. If this challenge does arise, they will be better equipped this time. As they are all members of *Ikageng Ditamating* they will have the strength of a united organisation behind them, and will be well prepared to take on the municipality and fight for their rights.

Independencia de la Mujer (Women's Independence) Co-operative, Montevideo, Uruguay by Lucia Fernandez and Melanie Samson

The *Independencia de la Mujer* (Women's Independence) Co-operative was formed in Montevideo, Uruguay on December 2, 2005 by a group of four women brainstorming ways to work together and improve their income collectively. All of them occasionally helped men in their families who worked as *clasificadores*. They thought that if they could unite and work together they could attain a more stable income. According to Maria Peres, one of the founding members, "as we didn't want to have a boss, we decided to set up a co-operative because we thought it is the best way to avoid having a boss." They knew that to register a co-operative they needed at least five people, so they looked for a fifth woman to join them.

The women obtained a trolley and started collecting recyclables from garbage bins in the area where they lived. Although they started by themselves, a councillor named Juan Ansúa and a lay missionary named Jorge Meoni provided them with support by assisting the members in registering the co-operative. They also helped the women to make brochures that explain their work and asked residents to provide them with recyclables so that they would not have to collect from the garbage bins.



Member of Independencia de la Mujer in her uniform

(photo by Lucia Fernandez)

The members of the co-operative collect recyclable materials from households and companies in the area. They provide this service for free and earn their income by selling the recyclables. At first they used a trolley, but after receiving a loan from *Cudecoop* (a federation of co-operatives) they were able to purchase a van. They now collect materials with the van, sort them in a small warehouse that is provided to them for free by the relative of one member, and sell the materials to the highest bidder. The members take great pride in the uniforms that they designed for themselves. In addition to protecting their clothes, the uniforms help them to feel like ‘workers,’ provide them with a collective identity and make them recognisable to the public.

The main objective of the co-operative is to work together to strategise how to gather materials from existing clients and how to get new clients. At its peak the co-operative had 12 members. They would meet weekly and make decisions collectively. The co-operative now has only four members. Maria explains that some of the members left as they found jobs with better incomes. Others left as they were not able to care for their children and work in the co-operative at the same time. Some simply didn’t want to work hard enough and left when the income dropped.

Independencia de la Mujer has good relations with co-operatives composed only of men, some of which they are connected to through family relations. Maria reports that they have considered allowing men to join, but for now it remains an exclusively female co-operative. This can help them to address some of the particular problems confronted by women *clasificadoras*. For example, members of *Independencia* have found that men were paid more than they were for PVC containers. In one case a buyer refused to give them prices over the phone, even though he had given prices to men from another co-operative. Maria explains:

Yes, we are always discriminated against. But we want to show we can do things as independent women, that we can carry bundles of materials and also be in charge of burning copper.¹⁸ We want to show we can recycle.

Working in a co-operative has helped the members of *Independencia de la Mujer* to access support and resources, increase their incomes and advance as women in the sector. However, the current economic crisis is creating tremendous problems for the members. According to Maria, “the situation is really horrible. We used to get up to \$100 (US\$4.15) per kg. Now we get \$15 (\$0.62). Cardboard, newspaper and green bottles are not purchased anymore.” Most of *Independencia’s* clients are no longer producing significant enough amounts of material to make it worthwhile for them to collect the materials, so they have transferred the few remaining clients to another co-operative and have basically stopped their work as *clasificadoras* for now. Like other *clasificadoras*, Maria and the members of *Independencia* are forced to try to find other work to generate an income. Although there is some work in the construction sector in the summer months, this mainly goes to men, and the women of *Independencia* are once again confronted with the challenges of gender discrimination.

Coopcarmo, Mesquita, Brazil by Leslie Tuttle, Sonia Maria Dias and Melanie Samson¹⁹



Members of Coopcarmo, Brazil.

(photo by Emmanuela Lorenz)

“Back in those days, we were looking for charity.” This is how Hada Rúbia Silva, President and Director of *Cooperativa Mista de Coleta Seletiva e Reaproveitamento de*

¹⁸ “Burning copper” refers to the burning of plastic off of pipes to obtain the copper, which has one of the highest prices.

¹⁹ This story is based on an interview with Hada Rúbia Silva conducted and translated by Elaine Jones and recorded and transcribed by Leslie Tuttle on March 2, 2008; interviews conducted with Hada Rúbia Silva by Sonia Maria Dias on May 8-11, 2007; and email communication with Hada Rúbia Silva in December 2008.

Mesquita (Coopcarmo), describes the women of Coopcarmo before they began to organise.

Traditionally, women were always looking for handouts from the church. One day, the priest stopped in the middle of the mass and started telling us that we could change our lives. He had come from Rio Grande do Sul, another area where the congregations had been very active.

The priest inspired Hada's church members to begin a programme called the 'kilo campaign'. The parish consisted of 12 communities, each assigned a co-ordinator. Hada was the co-ordinator for her neighbourhood. Her job was to go to shop-owners in her area and request one kilo of food to distribute amongst poor members of the congregation, including herself. She also collected leftovers from wholesalers whom she asked to donate whatever they had not sold by the end of the day.

Through this work the co-ordinators came to realise there were many poor women sitting around without work, not producing anything, so Hada and others got them started making an unleavened bread called '*pan de Cristo*' (bread of Christ). Soon, the priest introduced another idea during the mass, one that would create jobs in the community. This time the women were not focused on handouts, but on waste picking. Hada recounts what he said: "This is an empowerment programme to combat your problems." She assisted in recruiting church members to begin a recycling project.

That is how Hada and 25 other church members began walking their neighbourhoods, collecting recyclable materials that they carried in backpacks. In retrospect, she says that they really didn't know what they were doing. It was difficult carrying everything on their backs, and they couldn't go very far. Eventually, the nuns gave them a donkey and a cart, but they still did not know much about how to proceed.

Once they began waste picking, they were subjected to all kinds of discrimination, called names and accused of being 'smelly'. Most of the women are black and have low levels of education, so the stigma of waste picking compounded the existing racial discrimination. Hada's son was harassed and humiliated because of his mother's activities. Their requests to the municipality to supply trucks for collection were dismissed. This too, they felt, was a form of discrimination. One day they waited for the mayor to leave a meeting and pressed their demands. "You'll have a truck by next Thursday," he promised. But it never appeared and a long battle ensued. When the trucks finally did arrive, there was a huge celebration.

"The next thing we learned about was the environment and how it relates to what we are doing," Hada elaborates. The grassroots nature of their project attracted support from Belgian and German NGOs who helped to educate them about environmental issues and supported their efforts to improve their recycling and sorting processes over the next eight years. Initially they were not accustomed to thinking in organisational terms, and they thought of themselves as 'housewife volunteers'. As they worked together, the NGOs trained them to build their management capacity and the women formed the co-operative Coopcarmo. Registering their co-operative as a legal entity required that women who "had been living completely outside of the boundaries of

society” had to take on the bureaucracy. In June of 2003, ten years after they first lifted their backpacks, the *catadoras* of Coopcarmo gained official status.

The Coopcarmo *catadoras* collect paper, plastic, metal and glass following specific routes and varying the neighbourhoods in which they work from day to day. They conduct awareness programmes with neighbourhood residents and businesses to explain the importance of managing one’s own garbage and the resulting benefits to people’s health and the environment. The co-operative is not paid for collecting the materials, but generates income by selling the recyclables. Members sell the materials collectively and co-operative members are paid based on the number of days worked. Although past earnings exceeded the minimum wage, the current financial crisis has decreased profits, dropping their earnings to below the minimum wage. In addition to their wages from the co-operative, members receive a ‘*cesta básica*’ of basic foods from the municipality, which is targeted for low-income employees.

In the beginning, a priest was a member of the co-operative and made most of the decisions. When the members said that they wanted more autonomy the priest left, and they took up the challenge of running the co-operative themselves. Coopcarmo has grown to count 20 *catadoras* as members. It has developed a formal structure, appointing a Director, a President and an Administrator, and creating Production, Finance and Audit Committees that help to oversee the work of the co-operative. Ongoing operational decisions are made at regular meetings. Once a year, there is an Ordinary General Meeting to address policy.

According to Hada, working as a co-operative is not easy:

It is a cultural thing. You expect someone else to be the boss, right? We are raised like that, I remember when I was a child and my mother used to say something like this: ‘Hada, you have got to study so you can have a job, and a contract, and everything.’ Nobody was raised and had someone say: ‘Hada, you have got to study so maybe one day you’ll be one of the partners of a Co-operative!’ It was hard for us to understand these things.

Hada reports that members of Coopcarmo still find it hard to believe that the shed where they sort materials belongs to them, so they must also take care of it and fight to expand it. Even though Hada sees that there is still a long way to go, she feels that the members of the co-operative are becoming more actively engaged and moving towards working as a “real co-op.”

Hada explains how Coopcarmo’s origins as an organisation intended to support women have contributed to the internal strength that has sustained it through many changes:

When we started this project, we were thinking about those women who never had the opportunity to study or receive an education because they had very difficult lives. Their main objective was to make their lives worthwhile by turning them into productive citizens, giving them self-esteem and helping them to value their lives more highly.

The respect for self that Coopcarmo advocates is nurtured by a commitment to maintaining an environment of respect for others. Although the initiative started in the church, Hada points out that Coopcarmo's members now come from various religious backgrounds, and that these differences are respected. Initially, Coopcarmo held meetings to discuss how to deal with the racial discrimination being experienced by the members. However, as the co-operative has advanced and the women have won respect in the community, they feel that this has become less of an issue.

When Hada explains the kinds of challenges the women faced, she highlights the importance of building positive relationships with the municipality and the broader community:

The shed we built, the balance scale we installed, getting the municipality to pay for the truck driver. We only survived by building partnerships. People perceive us differently now. No one calls us smelly and my son is proud of our work.

Hada is proud of her work too. As she explains:

I feel very good, since I know now how much value this work has. The change came when things changed inside me. If you would like things to change, it is necessary to change yourself first.

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) – Organising Through Union and Co-operative in India by Janhavi Dave, Manali Shah and Yamini Parikh, SEWA

SEWA is the largest union of women working in the informal sector in India. It was formed in 1972, and today has a membership of over a million women members representing approximately 67 trades. SEWA straddles the realms of both union and co-operative. The union mobilises and organises women to come together around their work issues. It provides them with an identity, voice and the strength required to influence policy. Pushpaben Parmar, a waste picker leader, explains:

SEWA is a union of women like us who work without being noticed, who speak without a voice, and who get exploited without even being a victim. Union means coming together for a common purpose. SEWA is 'us' and we come together to get recognised as workers, get full employment and earn at least minimum wages prescribed by the government.

Union members also form trade co-operatives to increase their bargaining power to gain collective working contracts. Doing this as a co-operative provides the members with equal power, eliminating the employer-employee relationship. These trade co-operatives give women greater bargaining power, access to credit, training and markets, and moreover help them to build assets. SEWA has nearly ninety different co-operatives in both rural and urban areas. Some are built around products, others around services. SEWA has co-operatives in a number of trades such as vendors, midwives, weavers, handicrafts, snacks, dairy and waste pickers.

Recruiting members in the SEWA union

SEWA started its efforts to include waste pickers in the union in the late 1970s, when a university student was asked to do a study (Dave 1979) on the waste pickers in Ahmedabad. Her study found that the majority of rag-picker women were rural landless artisans who, until two generations back, were weavers, cobblers and leather-workers. They were *dalits*²⁰ who left their villages due to extreme poverty and arrived in the thriving textile city of Ahmedabad, where they lived in slums and searched for jobs. As living expenses were much higher than in the villages, the women family members had to take up jobs to make ends meet. Many took up work in the textile mills winding the thread and filling bobbins. When there was a decline in the textile industry later that decade, women were the first to be removed from work without any prior notice. Gradually, even men lost their jobs. This led to large-scale unemployment. The unemployed were not able to go back to the village as they had already sold off their ancestral homes to migrate to the city. Therefore, they started looking for alternative jobs in Ahmedabad. Men found jobs in small-scale industries as labourers, while women took up waste picking, as no skill or investment was required for this job.

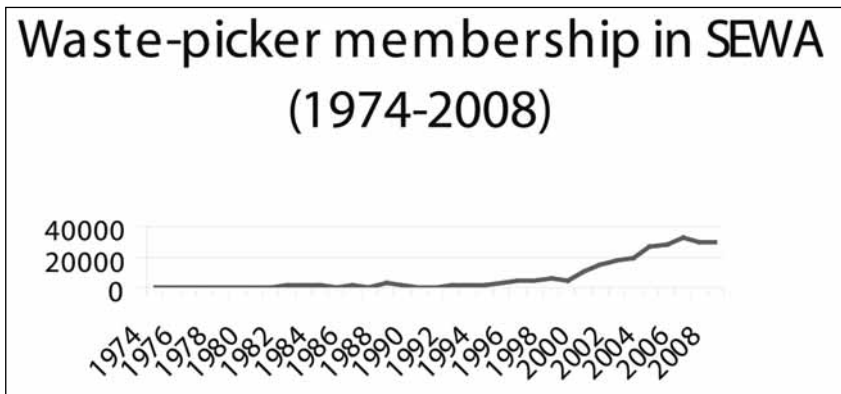
The study conducted by Dave found that waste pickers earned as little as US\$4 per month and worked in extremely hazardous conditions, where they handled acid bottles, electrical wires, nails, glass, dirty paper and cloth with their bare hands. This exposed them to innumerable health risks like skin diseases, eczema, breathlessness and chronic pain in their back, legs, neck and shoulders. Unstable income aggravated their problems, as they lived hand-to-mouth and had no work during the monsoon season. Caste prejudice, in addition to the low status of their work, increased their sense of worthlessness (Bhatt 2006).

After the study, meetings were held in the waste picker community. Inadequate income from their current economic activity was raised as a key issue. SEWA started with three main interventions:

- It identified reasons for inadequate income and interventions were made
- It linked members to alternative income generating activities
- Waste pickers were organised to develop unity.

Steadily, the number of waste pickers in the SEWA union increased. The graph on the following page represents the growth of waste picker membership in the SEWA union.

²⁰ *Dalit* is a self-designation for a group of people in India traditionally regarded as untouchables or outcasts or people who do not belong to any particular caste. They themselves came up with this term, as they were called '*achhot*' or untouchable which was derogatory in nature. The caste system is a social construct that has been constitutionally abolished by the Indian Constitution, but discrimination and prejudice still exist against *dalits*.



Initially SEWA drew on its connection with the Textile Labour Association (TLA) to help improve the income of the waste pickers. SEWA approached those mills with relationships with the TLA and requested that they give low-grade waste paper to the waste picker members of SEWA. As a result, some members obtained a steady flow of waste paper. However, the union had to confront the vested interests of mill employees who had an in-house arrangement and earned money for themselves from the sale of the paper.

The more contracts SEWA was able to secure with the mills, the more women joined the union. The increase in the number of union members encouraged people to take notice of them as workers, which brought them other contracts. However, each mill required only 2-3 waste pickers, and as the number of members increased it became difficult to ensure that each one would get work through the mill.

In 1978, the waste pickers organised a general meeting to discuss these limitations and chart a course for the future. It became clear that it was necessary to develop alternative income generation activities due to lack of income for all those members who depended on waste picking. While some members were keen to identify new supplies of waste, others wanted to look for an alternative income source. In addition to waste picking, three alternative income generating activities were discussed: weaving (which had been done by the women's ancestors); salaried domestic and institutional cleaning; and producing finished goods out of waste. All the women wanted an alternate career for their daughters who were already involved in waste picking along with them.

Co-operative Initiatives

Soon after this meeting, training was initiated for waste picker members in their area of interest and five co-operatives were initiated: a waste pickers' co-operative where women collected and sorted waste and sold it to a scrap shop owner; a waste pickers' co-operative which sought contracts from government and private offices to access waste paper; a weavers' co-operative; a co-operative that made stationery from recycled paper that it sold to various offices; and a co-operative that obtained

contracts to clean offices and hospitals. Managing each of these co-operatives was full of struggle and challenges. This was also the first time that these women had come together in large numbers and were managing a co-operative. Even so, the first three co-operatives are now being managed by women members themselves without SEWA's assistance.

These co-operatives were initiated to improve the working conditions of the members and to strengthen their source of income, but in many cases they were not able to sustain themselves with the alternate vocation and had to resort to waste picking from time to time. For example, members of the stationery co-operative produce stationery for offices, but this work can employ only a few members and so others have contracted their services to collect waste from residential colonies.

Currently, there are three co-operatives of SEWA waste picker members. In the last five years, two of them have procured tenders for door-to-door collection of dry and wet waste in Vejalpur Nagarpalika. This is the first instance of door-to-door collection in Ahmedabad, and it sustains 401 waste picker members of SEWA. There are 46,842 households in the ward and each Arogyabhagini ('sister of health' as the waste pickers are known in SEWA) collects waste from 100-125 households. They further segregate the waste and empty the wet waste into the tractors stationed by the Municipal Corporation around 1 kilometre from the society or commercial complex. They carry the dry waste themselves and sell it to the scrap shop. For picking waste from these wards, they get paid Rs7.30/- (US\$0.18) per house or office. Each member earns within a range of Rs800/- to 1,200/- (US\$20-US\$30) per month for three hours of work. They also manage to earn Rs400/- to Rs500/- (US\$10-US\$12.5) per month for the dry waste collected from the households.

These two co-operatives have an executive committee of seven members, who take overall decisions for the co-operative. The executive committee appoints supervisors from the waste picker group, and one supervisor oversees the work of 20 waste picker members.

Difficulties faced by the Co-operatives

The purpose of forming a co-operative is to make women owners of their work and eliminate middlemen, thereby contributing to their economic freedom. However, the government regulations and acts make it extremely difficult for women to run their co-operatives. The main difficulties faced by the co-operatives include corruption in the tendering system, irregular payment and lack of tools, and these challenges make it very difficult for waste picker members to sustain their co-operatives.

Campaign for Strengthening the Union

SEWA uses campaigns as a strategy to create unity amongst members and highlight the challenges that they face. In the case of waste pickers the most pressing issues are inadequate income and lack of visibility.



Pushpaben Parmar, a SEWA organiser, with SEWA members in Sewage Farm, Pirana Road, Ahmedabad. It is the biggest dumping site in Ahmedabad, where approximately 200 SEWA members go to collect waste

(photo by Bharat Patel).

The team for the waste pickers is called the *Jumbish* team, and comprises waste picker leaders along with a SEWA employee and a SEWA executive committee member. These leaders have now become employees of SEWA with the sole responsibility of reaching out to the maximum number of waste pickers and organising them. Every morning they meet in SEWA's office, decide their course of action and then spread out into different areas of the city. They organise meetings in the community to identify the needs of the community members and then link them to SEWA's services. The campaign team helps the members to understand the importance of organising. The Campaign team is like a bridge between SEWA and its members. In the past few years, the *Jumbish* team has managed to take up a number of issues related to waste pickers, and their achievements include:

- Procurement of a bonus for the waste picker members: For the past five years all waste picker members in Ahmedabad get a bonus of Rs.50/- to Rs.500/- (US\$1.25-US\$12.5) annually during *Diwali*.²¹
- Establishing the Gujarat Informal Economy Board Development Board: SEWA had been lobbying for a Government Welfare Board for workers in the informal sector for the past twenty years with constant petitions, letters and meetings with government employees. They were finally successful in 2007 with the establishment of the Gujarat Informal Economy Board Development Board. This Welfare Board is helped by SEWA to register the members. Through this board the waste picker members have obtained: identity cards; medical reimbursement up to Rs.1200/- (US\$30)

²¹ An important Hindu festival in the month of October or November (as per the lunar calendar).

if the member is hospitalised for 24 hours in a government hospital; skills upgrading courses in sorting of waste; and tool kits.

While there has been a breakthrough in lobbying activity with the government, SEWA continues to lobby for the following:

- Education scholarships and uniforms for children of waste picker members
- Health and life insurance for members
- Increase in the medical reimbursement to Rs.7,000 (US\$175) per year, and for medical treatment instead of only hospitalisation
- Medical reimbursement for members if they have been admitted to hospitals near their residence
- Abolishment of the tender system and replacement with contracts being entered into with those organisations working with waste picker members
- Shaded areas to be provided for sorting of waste in the waste picker communities
- Uniformity in the rates of waste in scrap shops across the city.

Organising through Trade Committees

The trade committee is a bridge between the union and co-operatives. It takes decisions related to the campaign team and has the responsibility to decide where to take the trade and its activities. The leaders of each trade form trade committees. In order to strengthen the waste pickers' trade group, regular trade committee meetings are organised. Each leader represents, and is accountable to, her members and discusses the issues related to her trade. Together they create strategies to resolve the problems faced by their members, and then pass on these strategies to the members in their communities.

Conclusion

SEWA is using the twin strategy of struggle and development to sustain existing livelihoods and increase members' income. SEWA uses the legal structures of a co-operative and union for the development of its members. While a co-operative is a viable legal structure to start economic activities, a union negotiates with the government and invisible employers (like the scrap shop workers) to get long-term benefits. Approximately 3% of SEWA's waste picker members are part of co-operatives, while the others benefit from the activities carried out by the union. The waste picker members of SEWA are approximately 2.5% of the entire strength of SEWA. Being part of a union with more than a million members helps to ensure that the government listens to the voices of the waste pickers.