

Chapter 7: Conclusion

by Melanie Samson

This book has brought together stories about how waste pickers in different parts of the world are organising, mobilising for their rights and creating new spaces for themselves within municipal waste management systems. It has identified a number of different ways in which policy and legislation have been changed to formally integrate waste pickers. In addition, it has explored how policy developments such as privatisation threaten to undermine the positions and livelihoods of waste pickers, and how waste pickers are challenging these processes.

The book has highlighted that waste pickers across the globe share the need to struggle for their rights. In many instances they are fighting battles against processes that have their genesis at a global level. For example, privatisation of waste management is advocated by international financial institutions and donor agencies, and is part of a broader agenda of neoliberal state restructuring. Similarly, conceptions of modern sanitary waste management that exclude waste pickers have been developed in advanced capitalist countries and are being mimicked in the South. There is, therefore, much that waste pickers can gain from exchanging ideas and uniting across borders to combat shared problems.

However, the preceding chapters also revealed that policies such as privatisation and formal integration take significantly different forms in different places due to the specific social, economic and political dynamics within each city and country. The ways that waste pickers organise in relation to these policies also affect how they are designed and implemented on the ground. As the book has emphasised, although waste pickers are organising in many places, important differences exist between organised formations of waste pickers within and across countries on issues such as how they see themselves; how they organise; how they would like to relate to municipal waste management systems and the state more generally; how they understand and situate themselves within the capitalist economy; and how they engage with other mass movements. Due to these differences in both the strategic orientation of waste picker organisations and the contexts within which they are working, forms of organisation and policies that are appropriate and work well within one context may have starkly different effects in other places, and may not address the needs and aspirations of local waste pickers. Therefore, the approaches to organising and policy presented in this book cannot and should not be treated as models which could simply be transplanted to other contexts.

In addition, it is important to note that many of the stories presented here are based on limited sources. As outlined in the introduction, one of the main purposes of this book was to gather stories and debates from the First World Conference of Waste Pickers to share them with a wider audience. More thorough and detailed studies are required to surface and grapple with the complex realities in each particular place.

It is hoped, however, that by providing information on a range of experiences, the stories presented here can assist waste pickers and their allies to identify some issues that need to be interrogated when developing their own strategies and tactics, and can help them to generate innovative ideas appropriate to their own circumstances. By highlighting some key points of divergence between different groupings of waste pickers, the book may begin to clarify some of the issues that require further debate in the forging of networks and alliances between organisations. In order to assist in this process, the remainder of this chapter revisits the main points and highlights some of the key issues from each of the preceding chapters.

Chapter One presented profiles of waste pickers from different parts of the world. It revealed that waste pickers in a range of contexts share many common challenges and aspirations. However, it also highlighted that it is important not to make generalised assumptions regarding the identity of waste pickers. The forces that drive people to take up waste picking vary greatly from place to place, and so too do the kinds of people who take up waste picking in different locations. A number of the profiles affirmed the findings of other studies that, regardless of their background, waste pickers are often discriminated against due to the fact that they work with garbage. This discrimination is exacerbated when waste pickers come from marginalised gender, racial, ethnic, religious and national groups. All of the profiles established that around the world waste picking is an important means through which people generate their livelihoods, and that it is crucial that they and their work be valued and supported. To this effect, the box included in Chapter Four on “Breaking down barriers, changing attitudes” highlighted some of the innovative ways in which the Asmare co-operative and the municipality in Belo Horizonte, Brazil have worked together to transform attitudes towards *catadores*.

Waste picking can be a solitary activity and most waste pickers around the world are not part of formal organisations. As Chapter One affirmed, some waste pickers consciously choose not to enter into formal associations because they value their autonomy. However, in cities across the globe other waste pickers are mobilising to form collective organisations. **Chapter Two** provided overviews of some of the different kinds of organisations formed by waste pickers. The organisations profiled included associations, co-operatives, trade unions and companies.

External professionals, NGOs, religious organisations and international donors such as the World Bank all played roles in the formation of a number of the waste picker organisations profiled. As illustrated in the case study on Coopcarmo, in Mesquita Brazil by Tuttle, Dias and Samson, the relationships between outsiders and waste pickers can be fraught with power dynamics. In the case of Coopcarmo the *catadoras* in the co-operative had to struggle to gain control from the priest who initially assisted them. Although other stories in the chapter mentioned the role of outsiders, few followed the example of the Coopcarmo piece in exploring the implications of this external involvement. More work is required to critically interrogate how the role of outside actors shapes and influences the political orientation, objectives, organisational form and functioning of waste picker groups.

The cases in Chapter Two revealed that organisational form is closely linked to organisational objective, as different organisational forms are better equipped to do different things. This was perhaps best exemplified by the piece on SEWA, which explained that SEWA in India has formed both a union and co-operatives in order to achieve related, but different, goals. In their contribution Dave, Shaw and Parikh clarified that SEWA organises as a union in order to help women working as waste pickers and in other informal trades to mobilise collectively around their work issues and to influence policy. However, a union is not well suited to gaining contracts. SEWA members therefore also set up co-operatives so that they can obtain collective working contracts. For SEWA it is important to form co-operatives, as opposed to companies, so that members can each have equal power and the employer-employee relationship can be eliminated.

The case of NIDAN, also in India, illustrated that legislative rules sometimes foster a bias towards certain kinds of organisations. In their piece, Singh and Saran revealed that the difficulties in meeting the requirements to form a co-operative seemed insurmountable to NIDAN, and so it chose to form a company instead. The extent to which the company form subsequently shaped the power relations between waste pickers and management in NIDAN was not interrogated in the piece and remains as something that could be further explored. Although co-operatives aspire towards equalising power relations, Hada Rúbia Silva from Coopcarimo emphasised that because people are not used to working co-operatively it is a difficult task to make co-operatives truly equal and democratic (cited in Tuttle, Dias and Samson, Chapter Two). It should not be assumed that just because something is called a co-operative that all members will have equal power.

A number of the stories in Chapter Two demonstrated that organising can both entrench and transform inequalities based on social divisions such as gender. Samson's story of *Ikageng Ditamating* in Metsimaholo, South Africa, revealed that initially gendered divisions of labour were crystallised organisationally when the young men who collected metal, and the women and older men who collected paper, glass and plastic, formed separate organisations. It required a focused organising campaign and an explicit commitment to eradicating the gender division of labour in order to unite these groups into one co-operative. Although members of the newly combined organisation reported that tensions have been reduced and that all members work well together, more work is required to investigate what types of gendered and other divisions persist, and what the organisation is doing to address them.

In other cases profiled in the chapter, women waste pickers consciously chose to form women only co-operatives such as Coopcarimo in Brazil (Tuttle, Dias and Samson, Chapter Two) and *Independencia de la Mujer* in Uruguay (Fernandez and Samson, Chapter Two). They did so in order to build women's confidence, provide women with greater opportunities, challenge gender stereotypes and demonstrate that women can do the same work as men. The experience of *Independencia de la Mujer* affirmed, however, that there is a need to also work towards the transformation of broader structural inequalities, since, when the economic crisis hit, women *recicladores* still had fewer alternative income generating activities than their male counterparts.

Alliances that link waste picker organisations and stretch across geographical space have a better chance at taking on these kinds of broader issues than individual organisations. **Chapter Three** looked at exchanges, alliances, networks and federations of waste pickers at city, country, continental and global levels. Some of the initiatives profiled are quite informal whilst others are structured organisations with clear political agendas.

At the more informal end of the spectrum, Slum Dwellers International has facilitated exchanges between African waste pickers from South Africa, Kenya and Egypt. The level of development of waste picker organisations varies greatly between these three countries, and the participating groups have different agendas linked to their specific circumstances and orientations. Participants therefore decided that the sharing of ideas and experiences was useful, and that the formation of joint projects was not necessary at this stage (Samson, Chapter Three).

Samson's story of nascent networking initiatives in South Africa highlighted that looser forms of organisation may be particularly appropriate during the initial stages in alliance building. South African waste pickers recently participated in the first national waste picker meeting. As the majority of participants came from dumps that did not have formal organisations and as this was the first meeting, it was far too soon for waste pickers in South Africa to begin thinking about forming a national network or more formal organisation. In order to facilitate networking and to support the building of organisations on the ground, the waste pickers decided to create a national working group with one delegate from each province.

The SWACHH National Alliance in India is also relatively new, although it emerged in a context where a larger number of waste pickers are members of formal organisations. In its contribution, the SWACHH Secretariat explained that as member organisations have a range of orientations, they decided to maintain SWACHH as a loose alliance through which members can exchange ideas, learn from and support one another, debate key issues and forge common fronts when relevant. Fernandez's story on the evolution of the Latin American Waste Picker Network (LAWPN) revealed that it shares similar goals to SWACHH in bringing together waste picker organisations from across Latin America.

The more formally structured networks featured in Chapter Three included the Association of *Recicladores* of Bogotá (ARB) in Colombia, and the National Movement of *Catadores* (MNCR) in Brazil. The ARB focuses primarily on work-related issues. It helps *recicladores* organisations in Bogotá to unite in fighting to improve their working conditions and secure social and economic recognition of their work. It has also negotiated a contract with the city for a waste separation scheme, and has taken the city to the Constitutional Court to win the right of *recicladores* to bid for privatisation contracts (Ruiz-Restrepo 2008; Samson, Chapter Three).

The MNCR has a different and broader social and political agenda. Like the ARB, the MNCR supports initiatives by co-operatives to move up the recycling value chain. But whilst in their court cases the Colombian *recicladores* frame themselves as entrepreneurs, the MNCR sees *catadores* as workers. It is a mass-based movement

that allies with other organisations of the oppressed classes in a common quest to transform society and eradicate oppression and exploitation (www.mnrc.org).

Despite these differences, the ARB and MNCR work together on the steering committee of the LAWPN and are co-operating to create greater solidarity and support between Latin American waste pickers. What is clear, however, is that there is much to be debated and discussed, and that organisations of waste pickers with divergent orientations will pursue different approaches. This was clearly illustrated in the remaining chapters of the book that focused on more policy related issues.

Chapter Four explored the integration of waste pickers into municipal waste management systems. It was based on an understanding that the formal and informal waste management systems form an integrated whole, and that even when their role is not acknowledged waste pickers are still an integral part of municipal waste management systems. Formal integration entails transforming the terms, form and nature of this relationship. In this chapter, Samson drew on secondary sources to present four different ways in which waste pickers have been formally integrated into municipal waste management systems:

- memoranda of understanding between an NGO and the Council in Delhi, India that allow waste pickers to collect waste from homes and be paid directly for services rendered by the residents (Waste Matters SNTD Women's University and Chintan Environment Research and Action Group 2008);
- a social accord in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, through which the Council provides a co-operative of *catadores* with a monthly subsidy that is not directly linked to service delivery (Dias and Alves 2008);
- the payment of a *catadores* co-operative by the municipality for rendering door-to-door collection of recyclables in Diadema, Brazil (Dias and Alves 2008; Gutberlet 2008); and
- the creation of a waste picker co-operative contracted and supported by government to provide door-to-door services which is directly paid by and accountable to residents in Pune, India (Waste Matters SNTD Women's University and Chintan Environment Research and Action Group 2008).

As detailed in the chapter, each of these approaches has different ramifications for the relationships between the state, residents and waste pickers. For example, by creating a direct link between residents and waste pickers the approaches in Delhi and Pune open the opportunity for greater resident involvement in service delivery. However, particularly in the case of Delhi where the municipality is not involved in the service delivery process, they also potentially facilitate a withdrawal of the state from responsibility for the welfare of citizens and the working conditions of waste pickers.

The use of a social accord in Belo Horizonte forged a relationship between the state and *catadores* that is rooted in appreciation for the contribution that *catadores* make to the city through their informal labour. As noted in the chapter, Dias and Alves (2008) report that the payment of the subsidy from the social welfare budget has been

criticised and some parties have argued that it would be more appropriate for payment to be explicitly linked to service delivery. However, Dias and Alves (2008) further observe that *catadores* in Diadema have had difficulties adjusting to the demands of being contracted as service providers. In addition, rather than being seen as ‘charity’ the payment of a subsidy in Belo Horizonte could be understood as recognition that *catadores* are already providing a beneficial service. It also promotes a more collective approach that moves away from paying each *catadore* individually for services provided, something that can be seen as either positive or negative depending on the approach and framework adopted by waste picker organisations. The way in which waste pickers are formally integrated into municipal waste management systems is profoundly political, and it is important that waste pickers and their allies think through the implications of various models before advocating for their adoption.

Chapter Five highlighted how waste pickers and their supporters in different countries have secured legislative and policy changes that improve waste pickers’ status and their working conditions. In Peru the recent focus has been on securing recognition for the role of *recicladores* within municipal waste management systems (Samson, Chapter Five). In Brazil, mobilisation by *catadores* has led to policy and legislation that acknowledge their existing role and extend it into new spheres. For example, the work of *catadores* is validated by the state as it is recognized as an official occupation. Because *catadores* were the originators of programmes to collect recyclables separately from household waste, the state can contract their organisations to formally provide these services without putting them out to tender. Furthermore, all federal buildings must separate their waste and give the recyclables to *catadores*’ co-operatives (Dias and Alves 2008). Whilst in Peru and Brazil waste pickers have focused on engaging government, in Colombia *recicladores* have used the Constitutional Court to secure their legal right to bid for privatisation contracts (Ruiz-Restrepo 2008). Although Indian waste pickers have lobbied the state to win formal service delivery contracts, the KKP KP union in India exemplifies the importance of also focusing on winning social rights for waste pickers as workers whose informal labour makes important contributions to the city. For example, based on arguments that the informal work of waste pickers already provides benefits to the environment and savings for municipalities, the KKP KP secured health and education benefits for its members (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005).

The four cases demonstrated that there are a number of different kinds of rights that waste pickers can struggle for, and a number of different means to achieve them. Whether particular groups of waste pickers fight for commercial or social rights, for example, will depend not only on the context and the type of policies their governments are pursuing, but also on their own political orientations and objectives, as well as whether they see themselves primarily as entrepreneurs or as workers. It should be noted that some organisations pursue multi-pronged strategies focusing on both commercial and social rights.

Though much can be gained from securing legislative and policy changes, the cases discussed in Chapter Five also illuminated a number of challenges related to using

legal approaches. The first task is ensuring that changes in legislation are actually implemented on the ground. Waste picker organisations may lack the resources and capacity to participate in new processes and to hold the government accountable. This affirms the importance of making sure that legislative and policy challenges are embedded within broader organisational strategies. It is crucial that waste picker organisations and their allies think through, in advance, what will be required to establish that waste pickers take ownership of, and are capable of exploiting changes in policy and legislation, and that engagement in these processes strengthens organising by waste pickers.

The chapter also highlighted concerns regarding whether legislative and policy changes can create new divisions between waste pickers. In Peru the amendments did not have the support of all *recicladores* (Albina Ruiz, cited in Samson, Chapter Five). Implementing new laws therefore opens up the possibility of creating divisions within waste picker organisations by serving some waste pickers more than others. This is a particular concern when it comes to independent waste pickers whom Dias (2008) argues are often excluded when policy and legislation focus on the inclusion of waste picker organisations as opposed to individual waste pickers.

In **Chapter Six** Samson brought together a number of cases to explore how waste pickers are affected by, and engage with, the global trend towards the privatisation of waste management. The chapter reported that in Delhi, India the authorities were conscious that granting contracts for door-to-door collection would displace waste pickers who provide this service informally, and so excluded these activities from the contracts. Nevertheless, the privatisation of the *dhaloes* (communal waste disposal sites) disrupted and ultimately hindered the work of the waste pickers, who had previously sorted their waste in these spaces. The companies' assertion of ownership over the waste in the *dhaloes* also threatened to deny waste pickers access to the recyclable materials on which their livelihoods depend (Chintan 2007).

In Cairo, Egypt the municipality and the companies that it contracted to transport waste from communal collection points initially ignored the well-established informal household collection system run by the *zabbaleen* and *wahiya*. When it proved impossible to simply impose the new formal system, the companies had to modify their plans and adjust the terms of the contracts in order to secure the participation of the *zabbaleen* and *wahiya*. Although the *zabbaleen*'s key demands that they be able to control their own labour and take the waste home for sorting and recycling were met, the new system still had negative implications for them. Some residents did not want to pay twice for collection services and their historically subordinate position to the *wahiya* was entrenched. Moreover, like their counterparts in Delhi, the *zabbaleen* live under constant threat that the companies will enforce ownership rights over the recyclables (CID Consulting 2008).

The cases of Delhi and Cairo affirmed that efforts to implement privatisation in the formal system will necessarily affect, and be affected by, the dynamics in the informal system. As was demonstrated in Cairo, failure to acknowledge this can undermine and derail privatisation processes. It is therefore crucial that the development of

policy in all spheres of waste management, including privatisation, be underpinned by an understanding of the entire waste management system, including the complex relations within and between its formal and informal components. Waste pickers must be seen as stakeholders in these policy processes and be included in negotiations as equal partners.

For their part, waste pickers must be sensitive to how their actions impact on others involved in waste management, particularly municipal waste management workers whose livelihoods are also linked to the waste management system. As the discussion in Chapter Six highlighted, the roles of waste pickers and municipal employees within waste management systems vary depending on the historical development of waste management in different cities. In some cities, such as Delhi and Cairo, door-to-door collection was never performed by municipal workers and has always been the domain of waste pickers (Chintan 2007; CID Consulting 2008). Privatising such services encroaches on the territory of waste pickers. As the example of the KKKPKP in Pune, India established, there are ways that waste pickers can engage with such privatisation processes that will not only maintain their role within service delivery, but will also challenge corporate-oriented contracting models and furthermore will continue to involve the state within waste management services (KKPKP 2009).

In other countries, such as Colombia, door-to-door collection has long been a part of the formal waste management system (Ruiz-Restrepo 2008). Privatising collection in this context undermines municipal unions and threatens municipal workers with job loss or deterioration in wages and working conditions. In such circumstances, if waste pickers demand to receive contracts for door-to-door collection whilst unions are still struggling against privatisation, then they could be complicit in displacing municipal workers and supporting state agendas to neo-liberalise the state and weaken the union movement. Building solidarity between waste pickers and municipal workers will require both groups to address negative stereotypes and attitudes that they may have towards each other and overcome historical divides that often separate them in order to work towards forging common agendas and visions. They will also need to resist attempts by municipalities and private companies to pit them against each other. Though this may be difficult, some of the examples in Chapter Six demonstrated that it is possible.

The discussions on privatisation highlighted that although, in all of the cases reviewed, waste pickers were negatively affected by privatisation, they made different choices regarding how to respond and what demands to make. In turn, privatisation processes were shaped differently by their mobilisation. This reaffirmed the broader point made throughout the book that an intimate relationship exists between organising by waste pickers and the development and implementation of policy and legislation. Each of these processes is profoundly political and it is crucial that all parties think through the implications of the approaches that they adopt within particular contexts. To this end it is hoped that this book sparks some ideas, inspires further research, generates debate and discussions on these issues and is of use to waste pickers as they struggle to build democratic organisations, networks and alliances.