

Acknowledgements

This book is the product of a collaborative effort that spanned four continents. It was started by WIEGO as part of the follow-up to the First World Conference and Third Latin American Regional Conference of Waste Pickers held in Bogotá, Colombia in 2008, and completed with the support of the Inclusive Cities Project.

Chris Bonner oversaw the conceptualisation and production of the book. Leslie Tuttle and Elaine Jones wrote profiles of waste pickers based on interviews conducted at the World Conference in Bogotá in March 2008. Carmen Roca, Martin Medina and Eloise Dhuy'e assisted with the conducting and translation of interviews. After the conference, Melanie Samson drew on WIEGO's networks to source additional contacts, information and stories. She wrote new stories and chapters and edited the final book. Szelenia Gray and Laureen Bertin copy-edited the final English language text, Agustín Cosovschi translated the text into Spanish and Lucia Fernandez copy-edited the Spanish version. Many people gave generously of their time and information to assist in this process. Of these, special thanks must go to Lucia Fernandez, Carmen Roca, Sonia Maria Dias and Laxmi Narayan who provided contacts, translated materials and conducted additional interviews.

Preface

by Chris Bonner, WIEGO

Although environmental issues, including the recycling of solid waste, are high on the global agenda, the voice of waste pickers is barely heard. Recognising this, in 2006 the global action-research-policy network, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), decided to embark on a programme to facilitate networking amongst organised groups of waste pickers across the globe. WIEGO is committed to helping strengthen democratic, member-based organisations of informal workers –especially women– and in particular helping to build solidarity and organisation at an international level. It has supported the development of StreetNet, an international organisation of street vendors, and Home Nets South and South East Asia, regional networks of home-based workers. It is currently supporting the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF) in its efforts to build an international network of domestic workers.

In the early stages, WIEGO's only contact with waste pickers was through its member organisations in India, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and the Trade Union of Waste Pickers in Pune (KKPKP). WIEGO knew little about the situation of waste pickers in other countries and continents. Thus the first step was to identify and map organisations of waste pickers and supportive NGOs and individuals. Through this process, WIEGO found that waste pickers in many Latin American countries had made great progress in organising themselves into local co-operatives and national co-operative movements, and were engaged in building a network across Latin America. With the assistance of the AVINA Foundation and researchers and activists belonging to the Collaborative Working Group on Solid Waste Management in low-and middle-income countries (CWG), WIEGO was able to forge links between waste picker organisations in Asia and Latin America. This collaboration resulted in the jointly organised and highly successful First World Conference and Third Latin American Conference of Waste Pickers, held in Bogotá, Colombia in March 2008. Since the Conference, waste pickers have continued to build their connections and raise their voices nationally, across regions, and globally.

In 2008, as part of a larger five-year global project on Inclusive Cities, SEWA, the Latin American Movement of Waste Pickers, the trade union of waste pickers in Pune, India (KKPKP), StreetNet International, AVINA and WIEGO embarked on a project to strengthen the organising of waste pickers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. A key component of this programme involves forming relations with waste pickers in Africa and Asia, regions that were under-represented in Bogotá.

This book was inspired by the waste pickers –women and men– who attended the Bogotá conferences. WIEGO felt that the stories they told and the experiences they shared should reach a wider audience, such as:

- waste pickers who might be encouraged to increase their organising efforts and try new approaches;
- decision-makers who could create favourable policies and laws; and
- the public which could begin to recognise, value and support the work of waste pickers.

Gains made by workers in the informal economy are often impermanent. There is a constant struggle not only to improve their situation, but often to merely hold onto what they have won. The world has changed dramatically since we started work on this publication. The economic crisis has simultaneously meant a downturn in the demand for recyclables and reduced their value, whilst creating a situation where more and more people are likely to turn to waste picking as a survival strategy. These changes in the political economy are having a significant impact on the ability of waste pickers to work and to organise. As part of the collaborative global project, we have begun to gather information on how waste pickers are being affected by, and responding to, the global crisis. We hope that sharing these will encourage others to do the same.

CHRIS BONNER

Director

WIEGO Organization and Representation Programme

July, 2009

Introduction

by Melanie Samson

In cities across the world, millions of people sustain themselves and their families by reclaiming reusable and recyclable materials from what others have cast aside as waste.¹ Testimonials by waste pickers and the findings of researchers show that, in a range of contexts, waste pickers are treated as expendable nuisances whom authorities and many residents accuse of marring the image of the city. They are frequently ignored within public policy processes and harassed and persecuted by authorities. However, waste pickers from around the world are beginning to organise. They are demanding recognition for the contributions that they make to the environment and the economy, and they are fighting to ensure that their role within municipal waste management systems is valued and made more secure.

In March 2008 waste pickers from more than thirty countries gathered in Bogotá, Colombia for the First World Conference of Waste Pickers and the Third Latin American Conference of Waste Pickers. This was a groundbreaking event where waste pickers and their allies shared experiences, identified key challenges and discussed ways of strengthening regional and global networks.²

The issues and challenges faced by each group of waste pickers in particular parts of different cities are unique, and must be understood on their own terms. As such, it is neither possible nor desirable to try to generalise across regions, let alone the world. However, as was affirmed in Bogotá, there are areas of commonality in the challenges faced by waste pickers in different places. There is much to be gained from sharing experiences, learning from waste pickers in other parts of the world, and engaging in joint and collaborative action.

This book seeks to contribute to this broader project by providing information on, and analysis of, some of the key points of debate and discussion in Bogotá. The cases discussed here are primarily drawn from organisations that participated in the conference and that are linked to the broader WIEGO network. Because WIEGO is still in the process of forging links with waste picker organisations in Africa and in Asia (outside of India) there are, unfortunately, fewer stories collected from these regions. Future publications will need to focus on the experiences of waste pickers in these parts of the world. Much of the information presented in the book is available in other places, although some of it was previously only available in Turkish, Spanish or Portuguese, and some of it was contained solely in lengthy academic and policy documents. One of the main objectives of this book is to make this information more

¹ According to Martin Medina, the World Bank estimates that 1% of the world's population, or fifteen million people, earn their livelihood from these activities (Medina 2007, vii).

² See <http://www.recicladores.net/index.php?lang=english> for further information on the First World Conference and Third Latin American Conference of Waste Pickers. Links to presentations made at the conference can be found at http://www.recicladores.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=77&Itemid=143.

readily accessible. It is hoped that by bringing together information on the experiences and struggles of waste pickers from around the world, this book will spark ideas and conversations that will be useful in educational, organising and policy processes.

The Politics of Naming

There are many different terms that can be used to refer to people who extract materials from the waste-stream for personal use or sale to others. Some of these terms, such as 'scavenger', are seen as derogatory and have been rejected by many who do this work. In cities and countries around the world the people who perform this important labour have had debates about what to call themselves. Some of the terms specify the type of material collected. Others are preferred because of how they frame the activity being performed. Some of the many terms that are used include: rag picker, reclaimer, recycler, salvager, waste collector and waste picker in English; *cartonero*, *clasificador*, *minador* and *reciclador* in Spanish; and *catador de materiais recicláveis* in Portuguese.

Ultimately we must respect the choices made by people about how to name themselves. Therefore, when writing about particular movements and organisations, this book uses the terms that are preferred by these groups and that are used in the materials written by themselves and their allies. However, to date there is no global movement that has developed a consensus position on the issue. A problem therefore remains as to what term to use when writing about this activity on a global scale. Before the First World Conference the Steering Committee had a lengthy debate on what terms to use at the Conference. Eventually it was agreed to use the term '*reciclador*' in Spanish, '*catador*' in Portuguese and 'waste picker' in English. The reason for the Steering Committee deciding on the term 'waste picker' was to emphasise that these workers perform labour at the bottom of the much larger waste recycling chain. When referring more generally to people who reclaim reusable and recyclable materials from waste, this book therefore uses the term 'waste picker'.

Overview of the Book

This book is organised around some of the key themes related to the organising of waste pickers and their integration into municipal waste management systems that were debated at the Bogotá conference.

Since March 2008 and the onset of the global economic crisis there have been major changes in the global recycling market that are having a significant effect on waste pickers and their ability to organise. Currently WIEGO and its partner organisations are exploring issues related to how waste pickers fit into the global recycling market, how they are renegotiating their position within it, and how they are responding to changes resulting from the crisis. These issues will be addressed in more detail in future publications.

This book highlights many issues related to policy, legislation and organising. It is underpinned by the understanding that there is an intimate relationship between

policy and organising; that the policy and legislative context influences the form and goals of waste picker organisations; and that mobilisation by waste pickers and their allies shapes and drives policy and legislative processes.

Chapter One of this book tells the stories of some waste pickers from different parts of the world in order to provide some insight into who waste pickers are, what work they do, and why some of them have started organising.

Waste pickers in many different contexts have found that there is power in uniting in collective organisations. These organisations take many different forms and have a wide range of objectives. **Chapter Two** provides some overviews of the different ways in which waste pickers have chosen to organise themselves and explores some of the challenges in organising waste pickers. Still focusing on organising, **Chapter Three** provides information on federations and networks formed by waste picker organisations to help strengthen their collective struggles.

Waste pickers generate their livelihoods and sustain themselves and their families by retrieving reusable and recyclable materials from the waste-stream – typically from streets, open spaces, garbage bins and garbage dumps. Historically their work has been considered informal and often illegal. Nevertheless, they perform an essential service and are an integral, although frequently unacknowledged, part of the waste management systems in the cities where they work. Waste pickers in numerous cities around the world have mobilised for recognition and formal integration into municipal waste management systems. **Chapter Four** looks at some of the different ways in which waste pickers have been formally incorporated into municipal waste management systems.

At best, waste picking has been overlooked within legislation, and at worst it has often been explicitly or implicitly prohibited. **Chapter Five** provides an overview of some different ways that waste picker organisations and their allies have engaged with and successfully transformed the law in their cities, states and countries.

There is currently a global trend towards the privatisation of municipal waste management systems. **Chapter Six** looks at some of the ways that waste pickers in different cities have been affected by, and responded to, privatisation.

Chapter Seven draws together some of the key themes and insights from the preceding chapters.

The Appendix presents the declarations adopted at the Third Latin American Conference of Waste Pickers and the First World Conference of Waste Pickers, held simultaneously in Bogotá, Colombia in March 2008.

Each chapter includes some questions to think about when reading, and provides material that can help individuals to develop their own answers to those questions. But the cases and stories are by no means comprehensive. The main intention of both the questions and the stories is to encourage debate, discussion and further research and engagement on issues related to organising by waste pickers, and ways in which they and others can mobilise to transform their position within the economy and society.