

The Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum: A Platform for Social Inclusion and Participation

Since the 1990s, Brazil has seen growth in the number of *catadores* or waste pickers² who have organized into cooperatives and/or associations, and an increase in the support these organizations have received from different levels of government and from the private sector through corporate social investment programmes.

In addition, many initiatives have developed that focus on participatory approaches to planning and implementation of solid waste management (SWM) systems. These have been framed under different institutional arrangements following a platform designed in the late 1990s called “Waste and Citizenship.”³ The trend has been away from repressive policies on waste picking and towards adoption of inclusive policies focused on legal backing, redistributive measures and social recognition of informal recyclers’ organizations. Most significantly the public in general, and informal workers in particular, have become active participants in planning and implementing approaches to SWM.



A member of COOPERSOLI, one of the cooperatives that is fully active at the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum.

Source: Leslie Tuttle

¹ Sonia Dias is WIEGO’s waste sector specialist working on the Urban Policies Programme. She can be contacted at sonia.dias@wiego.org.

² In Brazil informal waste workers collect mainly recyclables, as household waste collection is a service provided by municipalities.

³ For an account of this process, especially on the genesis of the National Waste and Citizenship Forum, see Dias 2006.

The recognition that social dialogue is a crucial first step towards making the income-generating dimension of SWM more equitable in developing countries has prompted social actors and the public sector to interact with one another. Without such consultation, programmes and projects can be faulty because they are done *for*, not *with*, waste pickers. Multi-stakeholder and cross-sectoral dialogues need to be framed in order to address the demands of different groups of informal workers; thus there is an ongoing need for public channels such as forums, councils for public policies, etc.

In Belo Horizonte, Brazil's third largest city, one platform that brings together different stakeholders – including waste pickers and informal collectors of debris – in planning, implementing and monitoring of recycling schemes is the *Fórum Municipal Lixo e Cidadania de Belo Horizonte*, or the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum of Belo Horizonte (hereafter referred to as FMLC BH). The FMLC BH grew from the process that created municipal and state forums, carried out by the National Waste and Citizenship Forum, which formed in 1998.

This Briefing Note traces the genesis of the FMLC BH, its characteristics and its contributions to furthering the inclusion of informal workers within the solid waste policies of Belo Horizonte.

Background

The first waste picker association of Belo Horizonte, ASMARE, was created in 1990. Its original members were people who had been involved in waste picking for decades; the majority of them had lived in the streets. In 1993, this association won the support of the municipality and

Box 1 National Waste and Citizenship Forums

In 1998, under the leadership of UNICEF, a National Waste & Citizenship Forum (FNLC) was launched in Brazil with the following objectives: eradication of child and adolescent labour at open dumps; eradication of open dumps; recovery of degraded areas and implementation of sanitary landfills. The FNLC also undertook promotion of partnerships between local governments and *catadores'* MBOs in recycling programmes.

Waste & Citizenship Forums are participatory arrangements where public matters in SWM can be talked over and debated. The forums convene different organizations from civil society and from the public and private sectors to discuss how waste management can secure the right of informal waste pickers to earn their living through the collection and processing of wastes, as well as the betterment of their working conditions. Brazil's size and its regional, cultural and physical peculiarities necessitated the creation of National, State, and Municipal Forums, where diverse government and non-governmental sectors could coordinate their actions. The National Forum, at its peak, convened 56 institutions. In 2003 a federal inter-ministerial committee for social inclusion of waste pickers (CIISC) was created. It is composed of representatives from a number of Ministries (e.g. Social Development; Employment; Science and Technology; for the Environment). The CIISC holds regular meetings with representatives of the National Movement of *Catadores*. Soon after the creation of the CIISC the National Forum became less active and then ceased to exist. Nonetheless, there are Waste and Citizenship Forums active in many states and municipalities throughout the country. Some of these have adopted the principles formulated by the National Forum while keeping its previous denomination and internal functioning procedures.

There were several main achievements brought about by the social mobilization initiated by the National Forum. These included the passing of laws legitimizing waste pickers as service providers; support given to the organizing process of waste pickers; and the development of public policies for the inclusion of cooperatives in formal solid waste systems. Many of the achievements in the integration of waste pickers in formal solid waste management in the last 12 years in Brazil, as well as the increase of social activism of waste pickers, have been attributed to the existence of the new approach inaugurated by the Waste and Citizenship Forums. Their platform legitimized the waste pickers' claims for access to recyclables as a "right to the city."

was integrated as a partner in the local recycling scheme.

As ASMARE achieved public awareness and political support, the potential within the SWM field for social inclusion drew the spotlight. Recycling came to be seen as a way out from starvation for many people as unemployment rose in the country in the late 1990s. New people

entered the trade with different backgrounds, including many who came with formal employment experiences.

From 1999 onwards, other groups of people who collected recyclables were formed in the city. Although ASMARE and the municipality had its channels for communication and joint planning, this did not include the



The FMLC BH holds regular meetings engaging public officers and cooperatives of informal waste workers.

Source: Sonia Dias

fact that its executive secretariat is housed by SLU. This was a strategic decision reached by all institutions as a way to guarantee the municipality's commitment to decisions reached by the FMLC BH.

newly formed groups of *catadores*. The FMLC BH was created in 2003 as a public platform in which to discuss guidelines for integration of organizations of *catadores* (and also informal collectors of debris the *carroceiros*) who were arguing for public financial resources to be used to support their activities.

Its creation was the result of the demands from the newly formed groups and also from public officers, who wanted to have an appropriate place in which different actors could debate and organize rules for allocation of public resources for SWM.

When the FMLC BH was formed, it involved 21 institutions representing:

- membership-based organizations (MBOs) such as *catadores'* groups, *carroceiros* (informal collectors of debris), and craftsmanship groups
- public organizations, such as SLU (the official cleansing agency), Municipal Secretariat of Social Assistance, The Brazilian Bank Caixa Econômica

Federal, the Municipal Parliament and others

- NGOs, such as Pastoral de Rua, the *Rede Mineira de Educação Ambiental* (environmental group), *Moradia e Cidadania*, etc.

The initial activity of the Forum was to assess the conditions of the cooperatives (for example: number of workers, infrastructure, income) through a socio-economic profile study. This assessment was fundamental to the subsidized allocation of funds to the MBOs.

Characteristics and Dynamics of the FMLC BH

The FMLC BH is a hybrid institution – it has no juridical authority but it has been able to establish standard procedures for social inclusion in the municipal recycling schemes. The recognition it has achieved from the political system is evident in the

The FMLC BH holds monthly meetings at the *Centro de Economia Solidária* (Solidarity Economy Centre), a centre created by the municipality to give support to the “solidarity economy”.⁴ A typical meeting convenes, on average, 16 people representing 12 - 14 institutions (about six of them from the *catadores'* groups). A meeting usually has as its agenda: discussion of operational aspects of the source-segregated municipal scheme; information on available financial resources; requests from the SLU to cooperatives for filling forms for production assessment; operational aspects of the Presidential Decree “*coleta solidária*” (which made it compulsory that federal government buildings donate recyclables to associations/cooperatives of *catadores*); a legalization process for the waste pickers' groups; and demands for warehouses from *catadores* organizations.

The participation of representatives of *catadores* organizations in the meetings is very intense: they are critical when necessary but cooperative most of the time with one another. Representatives from older

⁴ The “solidarity economy” refers to a variety of economic practices in diverse fields – from small family units to big enterprises – in various sectors of the economy and in the public sphere, that has as one of its main features social distribution of revenues generated by their economic activities. It is economic activity that is aimed at expressing practical solidarity with disadvantaged groups of people.



organizations tend to be more active than others. It has been observed, however, that representatives from the *carroceiros* are not as engaged in the discussions as are the *catadores*.⁵

The FMLC BH organizes itself into thematic working groups when needed; these then hold specific meetings and report back to the monthly plenary. Each working group is supposed to have representatives of informal recyclers, either *catadores* and *carroceiros* or both.

The FMLC BH has rules that outline criteria for membership, objectives, main principles, rules for deliberation and other related aspects. When adhering to the FMLC BH, organizations are

required to sign a letter stating they accept the Forum's principles and rules, as well as appoint its representatives.

Through deliberations at the FMLC BH, some of the cooperatives of *catadores* identified the need to form a network and the *Redesol* was formed in 2004; today it comprises 10 cooperatives. *Redesol's* primary goal is to enable collective commercialization of recyclables as a way to circumvent middlemen and therefore increase the profits for the *catadores*; it also focuses on processing waste materials as a way to move up on the recycling chain. Most of the cooperatives affiliated with *Redesol* work on sorting of recyclables and a few on processing certain types of waste like PET bottles for

A typical meeting convenes representatives from 12-14 institutions, including the *catadores* (collectors of recyclables) and the *carroceiros* (informal collectors of debris) .
SOURCE: Leslie Tuttle

making brooms out of plastic. The network is still in its early stage of formation.

The table below lists organizations of *catadores*, *carroceiros*, and craftsmanship groups, along with basic information about them. As shown, some of the groups listed are formally integrated in the municipal recycling scheme. Most organizations are of *catadores*; when this not the case, a reference note is provided.

⁵ This group of informal workers has not enjoyed the support of NGOs in its organizing process, which might explain their difficulty in voicing their demands within the Forum. The creation of their cooperatives was catalyzed by the municipality. Another factor might be that there is only one representative from the *carroceiros* while there are many representatives of *catadores* in the FMLC BH.

TABLE 1: List of Associations/Cooperatives convened at FMLC BH

Group	Foundation	Main activity	Members	Notes
ASMARE	1990	Collection and sorting of recyclables; processing of plastics	250 (permanent) + 130 (intermittent) Total: 380	Belongs to a network of cooperatives CATAUNIDOS ⁶ (commercialization and processing of plastics)
ASSOCIRECICLE	2001	Collection and sorting	19	
ASTEMARP	2002	Collection and sorting	8	
ASSOCIAÇÃO DOS CARROCEIROS DAS REGIÕES NORTE, VENDA NOVA E PAMPULHA ⁷	1999	Collection of debris and bulky waste	10	These informal workers are integrated in a municipal programme of civil construction waste recycling
COMARP	2004	Collection and sorting	7	Was one of three local cooperatives that formed Redesol, a network of <i>catadores</i> engaged in bulk selling of recyclables.
COONARTE	1998	Clothing production out of reused textiles	22	
COOPERSOL NOROESTE	2003	Clothing production out of used fabrics and collection and sorting of recyclables	14	
COOPEMAR	2001	Collection and sorting of recyclables	20	
COOPERPAVI	2003	Creation of brooms out of PET	03	
COOPERSOL BARREIRO	2003	Collection and sorting of recyclables	24	Belongs to a network of commercialization, Redesol (in process of legalization)
COOPERSOL LESTE	2003	Collection and sorting of recyclables and production of recycled paper	25	
COOPERSOL VENDA NOVA	2002	Collection and sorting of recyclables and creation of brooms out of PET	10	

⁶ ASMARE and seven *catadores*' organizations from within the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte joined to form *Cataunidos*, which involves over 500 *catadores* working in a recycling plant that produces pellets from recycled plastic.

⁷ Association of collectors of debris from three regions in the city – North, Venda Nova and Pampulha.

Regarding the relationship of “new” groups with ASMARE, the city’s oldest association of *catadores*, it can be said that it has been marked by a mixture of cooperation and dispute; after all, the groups are all competing for scarce resources. However, it is worth noting that ASMARE helped in the initial formation of some of these groups. In 2000, for instance, members of the group that was later formalized into the cooperative COOPERSOL BARREIRO received capacity- building assistance from ASMARE’s members.

Conclusions: Achievements of the Participatory Approach and Remaining Challenges

Although the word participation has become widely incorporated in the development discourse, one might ask to what extent the poor have been really involved in the decision-making process of the policies designed to help them. In the SWM field, there is a strong tradition of confining planning to engineers, administrators and other professionals within the cleansing agencies’ bureaucracy. Another characteristic of the sector is that there is little interaction amongst different agencies within a local government, let alone with sectors outside governments. The experience of the Waste and Citizenship Forum is an

attempt to involve a wider range of stakeholders, especially MBOs of informal workers, in the recycling programme of Belo Horizonte.

Some achievements of this participatory approach are outlined below:

- Socio-economic profiles, created out of studies of existing cooperatives/associations, have provided important information about *catadores*, their circumstances and their contribution so raising their visibility within the city government.
- Through the FMLC, guidelines for integration of *catadores* in the city recycling scheme were elaborated; as a result, more groups were included in the work. (For more details see the map in Briefing Note 6.)
- While prior to the Forum’s establishment, only ASMARE had a profile, the participatory approach helped other groups achieve greater visibility.
- The supportive environment for the creation and sustenance of cooperatives led to the creation of the network of cooperatives called *Redesol* – allowing for greater quantities of waste to be collected and recycled and greater commercialization of these activities.
- The Forum’s existence has enabled technical and financial support from diverse sources (municipality and others) for capacity building, equipment, and infrastructure.
- Through advocacy from the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum and the Minas Gerais State Waste and Citizenship Forum, waste pickers were able to change a municipal decree that limited the circulation of manual carts, which would have had a huge negative impact on waste picker livelihoods.
- Income for cooperative members has increased. The table below illustrates this for four newly formed cooperatives.

TABLE 2: Income evolution of cooperatives FMLC BH⁸

Cooperative	Number of Members ⁹	Income per month, 2005 ¹⁰	Income per month, 2007 ¹¹
COPEMAR	20	R\$280,00	R\$480,00 – R\$600,00
COMARP	22	R\$140,00	R\$312,00
ASSOCIRECICLE	22	R\$270,00 - COOCAPEL	R\$480,00 - R\$1,400,00
COOPERSOLI	21	R\$300,00	R\$490,00

Source: elaborated by Sonia Dias (2009)

⁸ Data from FMLC, Diagnóstico das associações e cooperativas de trabalhadores de materiais recicláveis em Belo Horizonte. Belo Horizonte, 2005. Also from FMLC, Diagnóstico atualizado das associações e cooperativas de trabalhadores de materiais recicláveis em Belo Horizonte. Belo Horizonte, 2007.

⁹ Data from FMLC 2007 Diagnóstico, per note 24.

¹⁰ Exchange rate: 1 BRL = .4238 USD on June 30, 2005.

¹¹ Exchange rate: 1 BRL = .5178 USD on June 30, 2007.



Redesol is a network of cooperatives created to support joint selling of recyclables. The FMLC BH was crucial to providing visibility to Redesol.

Source: Sonia Dias

the other. However, the technical staff of the public cleansing agency (SLU) is very committed to this participatory approach.

Waste pickers in Belo Horizonte and their advocates – including public officials – have been particularly successful in social mobilization, including committee involvement, public protest and liaison with sympathetic public officers. This has enabled them to leverage strategic openings in the political system and advocate for progressive and inclusive approaches to SWM.

The FMLC BH has played an important role in expanding the municipality’s pro-poor policy by integrating new groups of waste pickers that emerged in the city. It also helped to organize a legitimate debate about the allocation of public resources amongst existing groups, which in turn created room for cooperation amongst them all.

For More Information

Contact the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum of Belo Horizonte at fmlixo@pbh.gov.br.

Further information can also be obtained from Sonia Dias at sonia.dias@wiego.org.

There have also been challenges as follows:

- Some cooperatives attend the Forum’s monthly meetings irregularly and the *carroceiros* are not as outspoken as the waste pickers. This suggests the need for capacity building for these stakeholders.
- Coordination within the different local government agencies involved in waste related issues, i.e. urban regulation, social protection and urban cleansing needs improvement as this impacts policies created within the participatory platform.
- Members of cooperatives initially found it difficult to attend meetings due to the cost of transportation. At one point the government provided subsidies, but these have been discontinued.
- Not all chairpersons at all government levels are committed to participatory approaches. This varies from one term of office to

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This article is drawn primarily from:

Dias, S. M. 2009. *Trajetórias e Memórias dos Fóruns Lixo e Cidadania no Brasil: Experimentos Singulares de Justiça Social e Governança Participativa*. 2009. (Tese de Doutorado), Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. (Trajectories and Memories of the Waste and Citizenship Forums – Unique Experiments of Social Justice and Participatory Governance, PhD Thesis, Federal University of Minas Gerais).

Other Sources

Dias, S.M. 2006. Waste & Citizenship Forum – Achievements and Limitations. In Solid Waste, Health and the Millennium Development Goals, CWG- WASH Workshop Proceedings. 1-6 February 2006, Kolkatta, India.

WIEGO Policy Briefs offer information on policies and organizational practices that affect the informal economy. This series supports advocacy processes and disseminates better practices and ideas, contributing to a worker- and livelihood-centered approach to development.

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