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Finding a Collective Voice to Become Visible: The Creation of the RENAREC

Impact: *After almost three years of continuous work, in July 2011, members of the RENAREC were able to celebrate an important organizational milestone: their legal recognition as a National Federation of waste pickers' organizations – a goal that they set their eyes on soon after the network was established in December 2008.*

“We need to remember the history of the National Network...We were on our own before....when we found out that there were more compañeros, we realized we could be united. To be organized within the National Network has helped us,” says María Llanes, former (and first) President of the National Network of Waste Pickers of Ecuador, RENAREC (by its Spanish acronym).

After almost three years of continuous work, in July 2011, members of the RENAREC were able to celebrate an important organizational milestone: their legal recognition as a National Federation of waste pickers' organizations – a goal that they set their eyes on soon after the network was established in December 2008. With this new status, RENAREC has a stronger position as it further engages governments, both national and local, in the search for better working and living conditions for people in the sector.

Already a recognized stakeholder in discussions on issues relating to the popular economy and waste management, with legal recognition, RENAREC's membership has access to public programmes and services, including uniforms, work equipment and capacity building on waste management. It also hopes that it will give waste pickers a stronger stance as they start discussions with the Association of Ecuadorian Municipalities as part of their continuous efforts to get support for the bill on recycling that they submitted to the National Assembly. Such a bill would recognize the value to society of this profession and grant waste pickers rights other workers have (e.g. social protection, occupational health and safety, etc.).

Background

Ecuador, as most countries in the world, is struggling to manage waste generated in increasingly populated urban areas. For a long time, waste pickers in Ecuador – mostly poor women who are head of their households – have been collecting, sorting and re-channelling recyclable materials



photo: RENAREC

into the production of new goods, thereby benefiting society, private firms and environmental protection. It is estimated that these workers annually recuperate over 200,000 tonnes of reusable materials that represent US\$25 million in savings for Ecuador. With the appropriate support, such contributions could increase even more since recycling remains low in Ecuador. Despite this, waste pickers are in most cases invisible, discriminated against, marginalized and not sufficiently organized.

As waste pickers realized in meetings sponsored by Fundación AVINA in 2008, this lack of organization was preventing them from engaging with public officials on the issues affecting their lives and from having access to public resources. At the end of that year, the First National Meeting of Waste Pickers was organized in Cuenca with support from AVINA and Fundación Alianza, a support organization. The meeting was attended by women and men representing 18 organizations from different cities and regions in the country and different sub-sectors within the sector (waste collectors in the streets, in landfills, etc.). Representatives from municipal governments, from technical assistance and (environmental) non-governmental organizations, as well as from waste pickers' organizations from the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Waste Pickers (Red Lacre) were also there.

This was an exciting process for Ecuadorian waste pickers. For the first time, they were able to share experiences each other and understand that they were part of a broader movement. They saw that if they were organized at the national level, they could also develop and push their own proposals forward and participate in solid waste management systems.

RENAREC was thus created to organize waste pickers, look for better working and living conditions, and for greater visibility and recognition of these workers as valuable economic actors that benefit society and environmental sustainability.

Increasing Visibility and Validity

Aware of the relevance of having a strong organizational foundation to be heard by government agencies, RENAREC has prioritized activities to develop the organizational capacities of its members. Since its formation, it has

managed projects for over US\$150,000 from various funders aimed at building capacity, obtaining the juridical personality of RENAREC and its members, developing leadership, management and administrative skills, and business development.

While strong organizations require time to consolidate, RENAREC has seen remarkable progress in a relatively short span of time. Through frequent meetings, it has developed a national leadership, created clear mission and vision statements and a plan of action to guide its activities until 2015. It is currently the only waste pickers' organization at the national level in Ecuador and has seen its membership grow from 18 to 20 organizations in three years. Having a juridical personality has also allowed RENAREC to establish dialogues with public officials and to make presentations about the work it does and the services it provides. Such dialogues have come to fruition: RENAREC recently succeeded in signing an agreement with the Municipality of Quito, through the Ministry of Environment, to participate in cleansing services.

The emphasis on having a strong organization has always been paired with sustained efforts to coordinate and engage – respectfully, yet firmly – with local and national governments. Since the beginning, RENAREC has sought to build solid trust relationships both with government officials at all levels and with private companies to raise awareness among them on the relevance of the work waste pickers do. It expects that these efforts will build up over time and eventually lead to getting larger support from policy makers and local stakeholders, on one hand, for the passage of an enabling legal framework for their work, and, on the other, that member organizations will be able to effectively engage with other actors, namely buyers and private firms, within the recycling value chain.

As María Llanes puts it, “We have created this movement to get national recognition in benefit of our families in particular, and the society in general, and to empower our *compañeros*, by disseminating our activities. To achieve our mission we are building our capacities and

we are managing resources for member associations. Our clients, the companies that buy our products and our local governments are our *compañeros* and partners. Our commitment is to work jointly with them.”

None of these achievements would have been possible without RENAREC's understanding that it is part of a larger movement. Being part of the Red Lacre has projected members of the RENAREC into other arenas, allowing them to exchange ideas, views and strategies with other waste pickers' organizations in Latin America and the rest of the world and to participate in national and international events related to climate change. Through its actions, RENAREC has started to become visible through increased media presence.

Looking Ahead

There are many more opportunities to seize. Looking ahead, RENAREC sees the need for further organizational strengthening and consolidation of RENAREC and its members. Particular emphasis is to be placed on capacity building in the areas of leadership and organization so that it can prepare to help its members to obtain legal personality too. It also requires more work in the area of communications to make the RENAREC more visible.

In addition to efforts related to the socialization of the bill on recycling, RENAREC hopes to strengthen linkages with end-buyers of recyclable materials in order to create longer-term business relationships that would enable waste pickers' organizations to move up into the recycling value chain.

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Inclusive Cities project: Inclusive Cities focuses on support and capacity building for membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the urban informal economy. Through organizing, advocacy, and policy analysis, informal workers are making their needs heard within urban planning processes. Partners in the Inclusive Cities project include MBOs of the working poor and technical support organizations committed to improving the situation of the working poor. For more information, and to access research and publications on inclusive urban planning and capacity building tools for MBOs, visit: www.InclusiveCities.org