



Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

Inclusive Cities Project

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ARB: Fighting for an Inclusive Model for Recycling in Bogotá

Colombia's waste pickers have been an extremely vulnerable group of people. Often they are migrants and displaced people driven from their homes by the country's armed conflict. They have low levels of education and few employment alternatives. On average, their daily income is less than US \$4 a day, and only 5 per cent of these workers can afford to make contributions to social security. As waste pickers, they face harassment, discrimination, abuse, and even violence.

These low wages and abuses arise from a system that favours models of privatization and from a changed perception of waste from worthless to valuable material. This means waste pickers have lost access to waste. They have also lost regulatory and policy battles to private interests that have the capital and political influence to define governance practices in their favour.

What Changed

Since the 1990s, the Asociación Cooperativa de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB) has been defending waste picking as a profession, encouraging the upward movement of waste pickers in the recycling value chain, and working towards the integration and remuneration of their activities into the public service. It has 1800 members, 58 per cent of which are women.

Under the Inclusive Cities project, ARB opted to overcome the challenges waste pickers face through four strategic, simultaneous approaches: legal defence of waste pickers' fundamental rights, social mobilizing, forging alliances, and developing policy proposals.

The use of legal defence has been ARB's most visible approach and has produced a series of Constitutional Court pronouncements upholding the waste pickers' rights to:

- Participate as independent service providers in the waste management system in the components of recycling and transportation;
- Benefit from affirmative actions to guarantee a level playing field vis-à-vis other tenders for procurement contracts and to be able to integrate more effectively into the waste management system;
- Have legislation on waste management that does not affect their right to work and to earn a livelihood;
- Be recognized as public service providers and be compensated for their work, which benefits the city.

In response to Order 275, ARB worked to form a Recycling Pact with other organizations. In March 2012, in alliance with the Pact, ARB presented a proposal for the inclusion of waste pickers into the waste management system. Though some differences remain, the city adopted many points for this proposal in its own waste management plan. For example, the city developed a programme to compensate animal-traction vehicles, and it started a process to provide waste pickers with ID cards.

ARB played an important role in the negotiation and set up of this payment scheme, including a tariff methodology and incentives for end users to promote the concept of recovering recyclable materials. ARB also negotiated that payment be made directly to individuals and that all waste pickers would be the beneficiaries of the payment scheme, not just ARB members.

Legal and Policy Environment

The legal and policy issues surrounding waste in Bogotá are complex. In general, the regulatory framework for dealing with waste at the national and district level has been designed to favour burying garbage rather than introducing systems for recovery or reducing waste. This approach has emphasized the role of private corporations to the detriment of waste pickers. However, since the Constitutional Court passed Order 275 in 2011, a systemic change towards a model of waste management with greater emphasis on recycling has been happening. This model recognizes and rewards the work of waste pickers and has started to materialize: 1) at the municipal level with the District Decree 564 launching of "Zero Waste" program in 2012; and 2) nationally with the addition of a waste recovery component in public cleaning services.



A waste picker sorts plastics in a recycling centre. Photo: J. D. M. Mulford

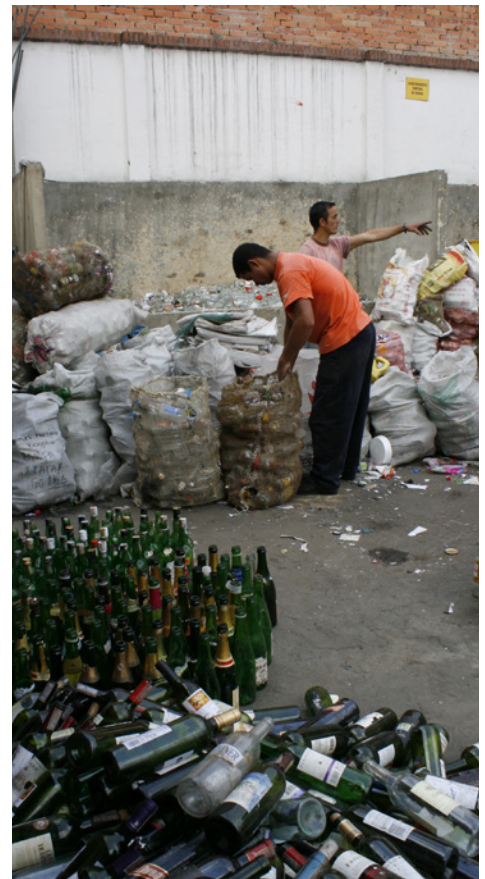
Results

Bogotá's payment scheme was launched in March 2013, and by January 2014, the scheme covered about 5,000 waste pickers, of whom 35 per cent were ARB members. To participate in the payment scheme, waste pickers had to comply with a number of requisites: they had to be included in the census of waste pickers, have an ID card, and have a bank account.

Waste pickers within the payment scheme receive \$87,000 Colombian pesos (about US \$46) for each ton of recuperated materials that is weighed at authorized weighing centres. Payments are bimonthly and are additional to the money received for the sale of recovered material.

Suggestions for Future Efforts: What Made It Work?

- ARB's strong organizational capacity and relationship with waste pickers;
- Clarity on goals and positions;
- Ethical leadership;
- Informed proposals and strategies based on research and analysis;
- Partnerships with national and international organizations and networks (i.e., ANR, Red Lacre);
- The primacy of basic human rights within the political constitution of Colombia and the existence of channels for legal recourse to individuals whose rights are abused by the actions or omissions of authorities;
- A government willing to change the model to include WP in the system;
- Informed use of legal mechanisms;
- Partnership with support organizations, which is key in effective negotiations;
- A high degree of cohesion within the organization as well as organizational strength;
- Continued resources to develop entrepreneurial skills and a business model;
- Recognition that change only happens with time.



Colombia's waste pickers, like these ones, are considered pioneers for their experience in organizing. Photo: L. Tuttle

“If the people, the leaders, our compañeros, do not understand that the outcomes are made by us, we will always be dreaming of, and hoping for, something that will never happen because we are not working towards it.”

– Nohra Padilla

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit www.wiego.org.

