

# WASTE AND CITIZENSHIP – THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE WASTE PICKERS’ ASSOCIATION IN THE RECYCLING SCHEME OF BELO HORIZONTE CITY

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## 1- INTRODUCTION

The potential role of the public sector on the strengthening of civil society has been the subject of many researchers. In this case study, we discuss the potentialities of involvement of the informal sector in the waste recycling and its impacts in the citizenship empowerment of vulnerable groups.

The concept of Integrated Sustainable Waste Management (ISWM) is mainly concerned with the implementation of strategies that go beyond mere technical considerations, to include, also, the social, financial, political, institutional and economic dimensions of waste management.

Since 1993, the municipality of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, has been implementing a separation at source project, within the framework of the integrated waste management system of its public cleansing agency - SLU, that has integrated the local Association of Waste Pickers – ASMARE, as a main partner. The characteristics of this project and its role on the empowerment of the waste pickers, is what we will discuss in this case study

## 2- GENESIS OF THE WASTE PICKERS’ ASSOCIATION

Informal collection of recyclables has taken place in Belo Horizonte City for more than 50 years. As the municipality has a sanitary landfill (since 1973) where picking is not allowed, the activity of this social category used to take place mainly on the city’s streets. Prior to 1993, waste pickers worked under the sun and rain, gathering their materials with manual carts, sorting it on the street, and sleeping next to the recyclables because they did not have a proper place for sorting and storage. The treatment given to them, not only by the population but also by the municipal government had always been of negligence and misconception: they were stigmatized as vagrants and often treated violently by the police, who drove them away from the streets.

In 1987, Belo Horizonte Archdiocese, through the so-called *Pastoral de Rua* (Street Pastoral) started changing this story setting up a socio-pedagogical approach within the waste pickers community, with the promotion of meetings and celebrations, which lead to the foundation, in 1990, of the Waste Picker’s Association – ASMARE. The main demand of the pickers was to have the right of

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working in the city with the collection of recyclables recognised, as well as to have a proper place for the sorting of their material.

ASMARE constitutes a managerial and administrative organisation consisted of associates that pursue a self-supporting business in the recycling field. The association is organised in committees as follows: Infrastructure, Health, Religion, Social Communication, Finances, Environment and Education/Culture/Entertainment. The Steering Committee is formed by a representative of each one of the 7 committees.

### **3- MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROJECT OF SELECTIVE WASTE COLLECTION IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE PICKERS**

In 1993, Belo Horizonte's Municipal Administration responded to demands from the waste pickers for the right to work in the city and to have a proper place to sort their materials. The city's cleansing agency, the Superintendency of Public Cleansing – SLU started the implementation of a selective handling and treatment system of the solid wastes of Belo Horizonte City, promoting its selection at the sources, in order to **minimise the harmful environmental impact** caused by its generation and **maximise the social and economical benefits** for the city. This management policy of residues encourages grass roots participation in the discussion and the establishment of several projects, placing the municipal authorities in the role of a mediator in finding integrated solutions, through partnerships with various sectors of society.

Within this new approach for the management of solid wastes, the municipality implemented, therefore, a selective waste collection system working with the ASMARE, as its partner. The recycling scheme is based on a drop-off system that requires the cooperation from the citizens, through the donation of recyclables to the waste pickers by depositing materials on recycling containers scattered throughout the city. Waste sorting facilities (two sorting warehouses) to enhance their recycling efforts were provided, trucks for collection of recyclables from the containers and, also, the provision of financial resources, on a monthly basis, to the association for their administrative expenses. Literacy and skills training were, also, provided for the waste pickers.

Education and social mobilization has been fundamental in this experience in order to raise people's environmental consciousness and social solidarity towards the pickers changing their biased attitude towards them. The Superintendency of Public Cleansing formed a multidisciplinary team responsible for the conduction of a mobilization work in multiplying spaces, such as schools, churches, public and private institutions encouraging the citizens to use the recycling containers. The educational approach combines the use of more conventional methods (such as workshops, public talks and distribution of folders) with an emotional one using theatrical and musical performances. Visits

of organized groups have been encouraged as a way to bridge the gap between the population and the pickers.

The local government's total investment in this project per month is around US\$31.000<sup>2</sup>, which includes expenses such as rental and maintenance of warehouses, specialists in social mobilization, collection of recyclables etc.

Local government and other multi-sectoral community stakeholders, work together through a Collegial Board composed of ASMARE steering committee and of representatives from some executive partners - the *Pastoral de Rua*, the Superintendency of Public Cleansing, the Municipal Secretariat for Social Assistance, amongst others, This board has been very important in the definition of specific roles of each stakeholder and constitutes, also, a forum for strategic planning and evaluation of actions. Through this forum, fragmentation of actions are avoided and stakeholders' approaches are integrated. The role of this board is to share the responsibilities in improving the association managerial and administrative capabilities and also its economical sustainability.

Besides the involvement of the *Pastoral de Rua* and the municipality other organisations have been engaged in this project in different periods. Some partners could be singled out, such as the LIFE Programme and the National Fund for the Environment, amongst others. The financial backing (1994) from the LIFE Programme (Local Initiatives for Urban Environment) from the United Nations Development Programme has helped with the construction of pushcarts and equipment for the warehouses. The National Fund for the Environment of the Ministry of the Environment has backed the Project, in 1996, with significant resources that made possible the acquisition of 110 recycling containers for the expansion of the separate collection in the city. In 1999, the Project was supported by the Inter-American Foundation with financial resources for the acquisition of recycling containers, for the production of audio-visual media, the organisation of qualification courses for ASMARE's associates, amongst other activities. Resources are administered directly by the Waste Pickers' Association.

Organising phases!

The **principal phases** of the project with a few key dates is provided below as to give an overall idea of how it evolved;

- *Mapping and analysis of reality – 1993*

Initially, the basic concern was to have an idea of how many pickers were engaged in informal recycling downtown, to subsidize the elaboration of the main framework of the project. A survey was carried out identifying then 511 pickers working in the streets, most of them sleeping next to their materials as they did not have a recycling warehouse for storage.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that this data refers to 2001.

- *Signing of agreement with ASMARE – 1993*

An agreement was signed stating clearly that the pickers' association was the preferential partner of the municipality in the implementation of the recycling scheme and with the statement of the responsibilities of the main executive partners involved, that is the municipality, the ASMARE and the Pastoral de Rua.

- *Implementation of the first recycling containers – 1993*

The first models of containers were implemented downtown.

- *Social mobilization and community's involvement – 1993 onwards*

The sensibilization of the population started with permanent educational activities and events being organised up till now, such as the pickers' carnival parade.

- *Implementation of recycling warehouses – 1994/1996*

In 1994, SLU rented a 3.200 m<sup>2</sup> warehouse equipped with kitchen, toilets, individual sorting boxes, scale, and other equipments. In 1996, a second warehouse of 600 m<sup>2</sup> was also rented and, also, an adjoining 600 m<sup>2</sup> warehouse was built to ASMARE's headquarter's (a warehouse built in a derelict area the association had previously occupied back in 1988). To date, ASMARE operates two recycling warehouses as one was closed due to its operational inadequacy.

- *Qualification courses for the pickers – 1995 onwards*

Courses for in-coming pickers to the association were introduced, where themes such as safety in the traffic, recycling and the environment, cooperativism, human relations, amongst others are discussed.

- *Expansion of the selective waste collection to other areas – 1996/1999*

With financial resources from, initially, the Ministry of the Environment and, later, from the InterAmerican Foundation many recycling containers were scattered throughout the city enabling an increase in ASMARE's production.

- *Industrial plastic recycling plant – 2003*

A law-abiding term was signed between the municipality and the ASMARE for the donation of an area for the construction of a plant for plastic recycling to be managed by ASMARE and 6 other pickers' association from 6 municipalities nearby Belo Horizonte. Resources for this recycling plant will come from different sources such as the *Fundação do Brasil* (a foundation of the *Banco do Brasil* - a state owned bank) and the InterAmerican Foundation.

#### **4- ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITATIONS**

The recognition of the important work being done by this segment contributed to: improving the waste pickers' self-esteem, for a sense of social solidarity in the city's population, and for a more positive public attitude towards them and their work.

With the implementation of recycling containers and warehouses, the need for sorting on the streets was eliminated, which contributed greatly in the first 4 years of the partnership for the reduction of street picking in the streets.

The waste pickers' working conditions improved greatly, which helped to attract new members to ASMARE: from an initial membership of 31 pickers in 1993, the association has now grown to 380. Additional jobs were created in the sorting and recycling facilities, making the way for those with physical problems or those aged to have the opportunity to work on a lighter job. In terms of production, collection has increased from 15 tons in 1993 to 450 tons per month. The impact on terms of income generation can also be cited: 54% of the associates earn up to 2 minimum salaries, 40% earn between 2 and 4 salaries and 6% 5 minimum salaries.

If on the one hand this project brought positive impacts on the living conditions of work and life of this social segment, on the other hand, the waste picker's participation in this public policy contributed to the creation of a more democratic culture within the Public Cleansing Agency, having, also, helped to strengthen the institution's regulatory capability in the field of waste picking.

Some limitations could be pointed out. Initially, it is important to stress that such a project brings about certain challenges that refer to the weak level of professionalization of this segment, due to its historical marginality, lack of formal education and its resistency towards social and work organization. This reflects on the quality of sorted recyclables, on the difficulty of incorporation of methods to collect reliable data for the project and in the compliance of work routines. It requires a high level of patience and a strong conviction of the project's social benefit on terms of poverty alleviation within the staff of the project.

The ability of this public policy to extend and to consolidate its citizenship dimensions lies on the equation of limits referring to its lack of integration within a broader municipal policy for development of a local recycling industry. Something that is beginning to be addressed now with the municipality backing of the area for the construction of the ASMARE's plastic recycling plant.

Another limitation identified refers to the lack of a more comprehensive regulatory urban policy towards the activity of junk shops that operate on illegal and polluting basis in the city. This has meant that the situation of street picking, that was under control in the initial 4 years of the partnership, has run out of hand

since these pickers are not ASMARE's associates and they do not comply with the rules for street picking agreed with the municipality. There is no official data on the number of pickers but we know by sight that it has increased dramatically. This has meant that the containers have been violated and recyclables stolen, which means less production for ASMARE and a higher expenditure on the maintenance of containers for the municipality.

Doubtless to say that the deepening of the country's social crisis plays an important role on the increase of the number of picking, amongst those driven to unemployment, but there is no doubt, also, that the lack of an specific regulatory policy towards this activity (which implies, of course, permanent monitoring) has played its significant part.

These coupled with other factors might help explain the stagnation of the production of the selective waste collection project, around 450 tonn, a number that has not varied significantly over the last 3 years.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The work with the waste pickers throughout these years, has been aimed at enabling them to act on their own behalf and this has proved right, as can be testified by ASMARE's strong leadership within the National Waste Pickers' Movement throughout the country. Newly formed waste pickers' associations see ASMARE's organization as an example to be followed. So far, ASMARE has helped in the creation of more than 29 waste pickers associations within the Minas Gerais State.

This expansion in ASMARE's ambit of action, going beyond the municipal level, aims at (1) the consolidation of the National Waste Pickers' Movement, as part of a strategy to force the implementation of a national public policy recognising, formally, the waste pickers as priority partners in the recycling programmes throughout the country (that is, programmes designed with an income generation dimension), as well as, (2) to create the basis of a "Solidarity Network" (the industrial plastic recycling plant with the involvement of associations of 6 other municipalities is an example of that) within the informal sector.

The milestone of this social movement was the First National Congress of Brazilian Waste Pickers held in Brasília, 04 - 06 June, 2001, with the support of Belo Horizonte's municipal administration and many other organisations such as the UNICEF, University of Brasília, *Pastoral de Rua* (Catholic Church), Ministry of the Environment, amongst others.

The wide system of partnerships that support the ASMARE's experience, can bring an important contribution for the establishment of a participatory process of

tackling the issue of poverty reduction, bringing development available for all.  
This is the association of waste with citizenship empowerment!!

