

# Waste pickers without frontiers

Across the world companies and governments greatly benefit from waste pickers' work. Yet these workers are invisible and looked down upon. But not for long. **Chris Bonner** describes the First World Conference of Waste Pickers this year in Bogotá, Colombia.

**A**t the world conference of waste pickers, Silvio Ruiz Grisales from the Waste Pickers Association in Bogotá, Colombia made this bold statement, "We waste pickers will keep our hands in the garbage bag that provides our livelihood, but our head outside of the bag, to fight for the public policies that we need to improve our situation. Intermediaries wait comfortably in their warehouses, and waste pickers do the hard work of collecting. Waste should not be for the intermediaries, but for the waste pickers who do all the work. United, we can fight for what is needed."

In March this year more than 250 representatives of waste picker organisations including unions, co-ops, associations, supportive NGOs, development agencies, governments and researchers, from 34 countries converged on the city of Bogotá. They were there to attend a three-in-one event: First World Conference of Waste Pickers, Third Latin American Conference of Waste Pickers, and the National Day of the Waste Picker in Colombia, 1 March.

The World Conference was initiated by the global action-research-policy network, WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment:

Globalising and Organising) together with waste picker and support organisations from across the world. It was coordinated through an International Steering Committee of 12 representatives from eight countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The Bogotá Association, composed of 25 waste picker cooperatives hosted this remarkable event.

Waste pickers are called waste collectors, scavengers, reclaimers, salvagers, scrap, rag or trash pickers. One of the challenges is for waste pickers to find a common and dignified name. The Conference decided to use *waste pickers* or *recicladores* in Spanish.

## WHAT WASTE PICKERS DO

Waste pickers earn a living from collecting, sorting, and selling recyclable materials, such as paper, aluminium and plastics found mainly on the streets, in residential and commercial areas, or at landfill sites.

The World Bank estimates that 1% of the global urban population, around 15 million people, make a living in this way. Women make up a large percentage of waste pickers, and child labour is common (see page 4). Waste pickers work in unhealthy and unsafe conditions and

are often subject to harassment and abuse by the authorities and public.

Working informally, they are usually excluded from labour and social protection. They are exploited by intermediaries who pay waste pickers low prices for materials, but command a high price themselves from industry.

But, waste pickers perform a valuable service to society. Laxmi Narayan, general secretary of the Trade Union of Waste Pickers (KKPKP), Pune, India, described the contribution made by a group of waste pickers, "... waste collectors do doorstep collection house to house, promoting home segregation of waste. This is decentralised, much cheaper than the public system of collection, recovers more materials and even has a programme for organic waste. It protects the livelihoods of waste-pickers, reduces traffic and pollution, and increases the life of the landfill."

## WASTE PICKERS ORGANISING

The organisation of waste pickers is most advanced in Latin America, and their inclusion and recognition as workers in municipal solid waste management systems is more common than elsewhere. They are primarily organised into worker



*Woman wastepicker working at the Alqueria Recycling Centre, a cooperative in Bogotá, Colombia*

cooperatives, which have combined into national movements in some countries.

By organising, engaging in struggles and negotiating with local authorities, a significant number of waste pickers, although still a minority, have improved their income, working conditions and status.

Brazil and Colombia have the largest and best established national movements of waste pickers, whilst those in Chile and Peru have recently been formed. Twelve countries now participate in the regional Latin American Waste Pickers Network.

The cooperatives have both an economic and social purpose and many define themselves as struggle organisations and part of the solidarity economy. The solidarity economy, sometimes called the social economy, is a concept widely used in Latin America. It describes economic activity where the working poor are able to claim a space for collective self-

empowerment and/or social inclusion, which allows them to build a better and more dignified working life.

The National Movement of Waste Pickers of Brazil (MNCR) is recognised nationally. It has the support of President Lula who set up an Inter-ministerial Committee for the Social Inclusion of Waste Pickers which meets with MNCR representatives every month. President Lula also holds an annual meeting with MNCR to assess progress in the Committee.

Outside of Latin America organisation is less developed, and in many countries non-existent. As far as we know, India has the only other national alliance outside of Latin America, but this is still functioning informally.

India has the second largest number of waste pickers after China. This is estimated at six million waste pickers, but only a small percentage is organised, either into unions such as the Self Employed Women's Association

(Sewa), or into self-help groups and co-ops supported by NGOs.

In parts of Africa, there are community-based organisations and projects, groups, co-ops and associations, often set up or supported by NGOs, but we know of few attempts to build organisation beyond the local level. Recently the Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI), whose secretariat is based in Cape Town, started engaging with livelihood issues as well as housing. It is supporting groups that have put some of their savings into recycling projects and co-ops.

#### UNDER THREAT

The issue of environmental sustainability is high on the agenda of world bodies, governments and NGOs. But millions of the working poor, who provide an effective environmental service through informal recycling activities, are not acknowledged! Increasingly, waste pickers are being displaced as municipalities privatise waste services, giving contracts to large corporations and excluding waste pickers in the process.

Developing countries are adopting technologies used in first world countries, such as highly mechanised trucks and incineration. These are often inappropriate, expensive, environmentally unfriendly, and less efficient than the informal systems they are replacing. In this rapidly changing environment, waste pickers are under constant threat even where gains have been made and legal battles won.

For example, workers at the Recycling Centre of Alqueria, a cooperative in Bogotá, fear they will soon lose their livelihoods. When their current arrangement with the municipality runs out, they will be forced to tender against large

private companies for a contract to access, sort and sell recyclable waste. In Brazil too, waste pickers who now have the political support of the Worker's Party (PT), fear that gains will be lost when President Lula's term of office ends.

### CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES

The main objective of the conference was to strengthen the organisation and connection of informal waste pickers globally. It aimed to make visible their contribution as workers to environmental protection, health, the economy and the formal solid waste management system of municipalities, and to ensure their effective participation and voice in all forums that affect their working lives and social position.

Another objective was to gather potential support from organisations, governments and international agencies, as well as to build and strengthen partnerships with committed activists.

On the first day of the conference, around 400 local waste pickers joined the 250 conference delegates to commemorate the Day of the Waste Picker in Colombia. Sixteen years ago several bodies of waste pickers were found at the University of Barranquilla. They had been killed, their bodies sold to the university and their organs used as teaching aids. This day commemorates their deaths and that of many other waste pickers killed on the job. Speakers shared experiences of the struggles and achievements of Colombian waste pickers and gave an overview of the situation of waste pickers across the world.

On the second day participants shared their experiences on key issues such as organising, privatisation/technological change and public policies.

On the third day the focus was on

networking and the way forward. The day started with a presentation from Cata Sampa, a local network of waste picker cooperatives in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Ten cooperatives have formed a network to build solidarity and improve their economic position through combining resources. StreetNet followed with a presentation on organising a global network.

Both provided useful ideas about the difficulties and advantages of linking up organisations into networks. Afterwards participants worked in regional groups. During this time Latin American waste pickers held their third conference. They expanded the number of countries in the Latin American Network from five to 12. They elected country representatives and agreed that the secretariat be based in Brazil at the MNCR.

The conference adopted a Latin American and a Global Declaration which:

- Commits conference participants to work for the social and economic inclusion of waste pickers in solid waste management systems and to promote and strengthen their organisations.
- Agrees to reject incineration and burial-based processing technologies and defend systems that support the popular economy.
- Commits waste picker organisations to sharing knowledge and experiences and to promoting and accelerating contact with the greatest number of waste pickers and their organisations across the world.
- Proposes to advocate for improved laws and public policies which effectively include waste picker organisations, and for waste pickers to be actors in decision-making.

On the final day participants left the conference hall and saw successful organisation in action. They visited local cooperatives and also had an opportunity to visit the Bogotá Association of Waste Pickers and the Colombian National Association of Waste Pickers to learn about their struggles and how the organisations work.

For waste pickers the conference represented a big step forward in their struggle for recognition, rights and dignity. It consolidated the organisation of waste pickers across Latin America. It built strong links across continents and provided the basis for ongoing exchanges and networking. It facilitated learning and sharing of experiences from different countries, and between waste pickers and other players. It highlighted their situation and gathered support from a wide range of organisations. It showed that waste pickers are capable, organised, responsible and not a "bunch of thieves" as they are so often described.

### WAY FORWARD

The conference noted that the level of organisation of waste pickers in different countries is uneven, and often weak or non-existent, so the time is not yet right to set up a global network. The priority tasks are to build and strengthen base organisations, national and regional networks, and to maintain links and regular communication across the world. LB

*Chris Bonner is a WIEGO organisation and representation programme director/convenor and member of the international steering committee. Reports, presentations and photographs can be viewed on the conference website [www.recicladores.net](http://www.recicladores.net)*