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Side Event organized by the PRESIDENCY OF BRAZIL and CEMPRE

Waste Pickers in Brazil: promoting sustainable development through poverty eradication policies

Wednesday, 24 September – 6:30 pm – 8:30 pm
Grand Hyatt New York
109 East 42nd Street at Grand Central Terminal - New York

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 1.6 million people worldwide are engaged in the recycling industry, generating around US\$ 200 billion a year. If the role of informal picking of recyclable materials is also taken into account, that number may be as high as 20 million people involved in the various stages of solid waste management.

Solid waste management and recycling have tremendous potential for boosting social inclusion while formalizing and organizing workers involved in the activity. Its potential for creating jobs is ten times higher than that for waste incineration or the final disposal of waste in landfills. It saves up to five times more energy than waste incineration methods and also reduces greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, particularly of methane. It is worth noting that, according to World Bank data, 5% of GHG global emissions can be attributed to waste burning.

GLOBAL OUTLOOK OF URBAN SOLID WASTE GENERATION

In 2012, the world generated 1.3 billion tons of solid waste. Urbanization, industrialization and demographic growth, alongside economic development, are the factors that most contribute to the increase of solid waste generation. Low and middle-income countries will, therefore, have a considerable participation in the increase of solid waste generation in the near future. Increases in waste production are expected as these countries succeed in reducing poverty levels and in improving access to goods in general, highlighting important dynamics involved while managing solid waste: industrialization, population increase, economic development and the urbanization process itself.

Also, reinforces the importance of promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns that take into account the central objective of poverty eradication, and supporting inclusive, safe resilient and sustainable cities.

From 1991 to 2000, the population of Brazil increased by 15.5% while the volume of waste grew by 49%. That scenario can be partially explained by the reduction in poverty levels and the social and economic ascension of a significant part of the Brazilian population, confirming the aforementioned trend.

The recycling percentage worldwide, according to the International Solid Waste Association (ISWA), is 16%. If the informal work of waste pickers is taken into account, however, that rate varies from 54% in high-income countries to 27% in low and middle-income countries.

WASTE PICKERS

Waste pickers are workers who collect recyclables in streets or dumps. They also sort and sell recyclable material to intermediaries or directly to the recycling industry.

A national assessment shows that there are 387,910 waste pickers in Brazil. The survey was based on self-declaration of people contacted at their households, and, as a result, homeless waste pickers or those who pick waste as a complementary activity to increment their income, may have been overlooked. Other estimates based on the data of public and private organizations and those from organized civil society suggested a number of about 400 to 600 thousand waste pickers in Brazil.

Government recognition of waste pickers' cooperatives and associations, and of the services they provide, shows that solid waste management and recycling promote decent work, social inclusion and environmental conservation, contributing to the eradication of poverty.

Other positive aspects include legal, local and national recognition of waste pickers' organisations, corporate development, cooperation with municipal governments, infrastructure, modern recycling methods, work safety training and technical qualification, as well as the eradication of child labour.

In spite of all the progress obtained, many challenges remain to be addressed in order to guarantee that all waste pickers have access to basic rights and services like health, education, and social assistance.

In this context, a main issue is assuring that the closure of dumps be preceded by actions designed to ensure that waste pickers gain access to public policies such as basic documentation, social and legal assistance, education, housing, and productive inclusion. To that end, the "Pro-Catador Programme" seeks to bring together a set of government actions to provide support for their full participation in the National Solid Waste Policy, especially in the aspect of implanting municipal selective waste picking.

THE BRAZILIAN NATIONAL SOLID WASTE POLICY

The Brazilian National Solid Waste Policy, launched August 2nd, 2010 by means of Bill n° 12.305, provides a normative framework and instruments to achieve that goal. A great innovation of this piece of legislation is that it recognises reusable and recyclable solid waste collection as an economic activity, that creates employment and fosters citizenship.

The Bill also established two important deadlines: the preparation of municipal, regional and national solid waste integrated management plans should be completed within two years; and the closure of dumps and implementation of selective waste picking within four years time.

By prioritizing waste pickers' cooperatives and paying for their urban environmental services, the legislation allows cooperative members to receive decent payment for their service to society and makes them less vulnerable to market fluctuations prices of recyclable materials.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY ERADICATION

Solid waste management is one of the major urban challenges and is related to health issues, climate change, air, soil, and water resources pollution, among others. It has been estimated that waste management impacts a considerable part of the budget for urban management in low and middle-income countries. According to United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), there are still 3.5 billion people in the world without access to this kind of service.

In the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), Rio+20, "The Future We Want", countries called for the development and strengthening of far reaching policies, laws, strategies and national and local regulations for solid waste management with a special focus on the life cycle of products and the development and implementation of policies to ensure efficiency in resource use and the environmentally correct management of solid waste. Furthermore, in Rio+20, countries also adopted the 10-Year Framework of Programmes of Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns, which called for increased efforts in promoting sustainable consumption and production patterns, with developed countries taking the lead and all countries benefiting from the process.

The economic efficiency of solid waste management through the engagement of waste pickers organized in associations and cooperatives and the positive social and environmental impacts of their performance are a practical example of decent work conditions and sustainability – the green job concept. It is essential to recognize the work undertaken by waste pickers and the benefits their work generates.

Brazil is currently at a moment of transition in its solid waste management model. The Brazilian National Solid Waste Policy represents a step forward in terms of environment and social inclusion of waste pickers: it consolidates the combination of environmental protection with social and economic inclusion and reinforces the sustainable development concept, demonstrating that there is much to be learnt from the waste pickers' experiences.