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WASTE & CITIZENSHIP FORUMS – ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

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Abstract

The Waste & Citizenship Forums are new participatory channels for formulation of policies for urban solid waste management that join NGOs, waste pickers' associations and public governments in an effort to improve standards on this area, especially by tackling social issues faced by pickers. Implemented on the national level under the leadership of the UNICEF, back in 1999, today there are more than 23 State Forums and also many implemented on the municipal level. This paper discuss their objectives, strategies and main impacts and, also, some of the challenges. Special attention is given to the experience of the Waste & Citizenship Forum of Minas Gerais State.

1. Introduction

Poverty has been one of the most discussed contemporary problems and while there is no consensus about what the concept means, how to solve it is, also, a matter of debate. Some will define poverty as a lack of what is needed, others as social marginalization. Some tackle the issue through an individualist approach (that is, individuals should take responsibility for the betterment of their conditions), others take the road to the defense of a “welfare system”; there are some who advocate that measures concerned with income generation might solve the problem, as, they argue, people’s consumption pattern can be increased. Many other conceptions of what the phenomena is and how to tackle it can be found in the specialized literature².

One important reference is Amartya Sen’s “capability approach” to poverty. As pointed out by Skirbekk & Clair, “*Sen claims that development ought not be conceptualized as the achievement of modernization, industrialization and economic growth, but as the expansion of people’s capabilities and functioning. Capabilities refer to what people can do or cannot do; and functionings refer to what people actually do or do not do* (2000). In Sen’s approach, people might suffer deprivations in various spheres of their lives, not only on the material side.

The gravity of the problem is widely known. The urgency to face it, is ever pressing. In spite of the differences mentioned above about a certain lack of consensus on how to tackle it, some consensus has been achieved amongst the international community towards the establishment of a number of goals – widely known as the “Millennium Development Goals”.

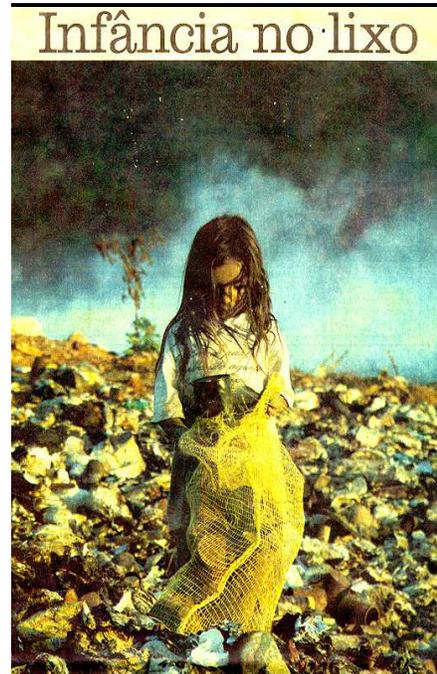
The departing point in this paper is that poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon: its understanding cannot be reduced only to material deprivations. Poverty eradication goes beyond the design of

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² For more on the discussion of poverty: GILENS, M. (1999). *Why Americans Hate Welfare –race, media and the politics of antipoverty policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press; SEN, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

policies for job and income generation. We should think of poverty in terms of citizenship empowerment, of access to public services (health, sanitation, education) and to the decision making process. This seems to go along with Amartya Sen's "capability approach" to poverty.

This paper is about an experience of grassroots democracy, in Brazil, within the solid waste management field – the so-called Waste and Citizenship Forum. This Forum has been a strategy to improve socio-environmental standards in the area through the participation of a variety of political actors, including – previously voiceless – waste pickers' associations, in the implementation of integrated waste management systems at local level. We hope to show how this approach has contributed to the achievement of some of the Millennium Development Goals, by tackling the issue of dump eradication and incorporation of the social issues related to waste picking. In so doing, we will also address some of its limitations. Before tracing back how the Waste & Citizenship Forum came into being, let us first explain in what sense the word forum is used here. A forum is a participatory arrangement where public matters can be talked over and argued about. It convenes different organizations³ to discuss, in the case presented here, the issue of how waste management can be associated with the extension of an important social citizenship right: the right for work, which means the right for the informal workers to earn their living through collection and processing of wastes as well as the betterment of their working conditions. From there comes the name Waste & Citizenship Forum.



Leaflet – one of the main symbols of the national campaign "No more children at dumpsites".

2. Genesis of the National Waste & Citizenship Forum

Although the word *participation* has become widely incorporated in the development discourse, one might ask to what extent the poor have been really involved in the decision-making process of the policies designed to help them. In the solid waste management field, there is a strong tradition of planning that restricts involvement to engineers, administrators and other professionals of the cleansing agency's bureaucracy. Another characteristic of the sector is that there is little interaction amongst different agencies within local government, let alone with other sectors outside government.

The constitution of a National Waste & Citizenship Forum came as a necessity to consolidate a participatory approach to urban wastes management in Brazil. A study carried out by UNICEF⁴, in 1998, estimated that 45.000 children⁵ in Brazil worked in waste picking, 30% of them without schooling. Some experiences of partnerships between local governments and the civil society in recycling projects

³ The organizations take part in it voluntarily and although there is no legal bond, their participation is based upon an agreed Charter of Principles.

⁴ UNICEF's first involvement in the area of waste disposal dates back to 1992, when an incident called the country's attention towards the problem of waste picking. Several pickers of the Aguazinha dump area of Olinda city, northeast of the country, were poisoned and hospitalized after eating hospital waste. There was suspicion that human flesh was mixed up with household waste. UNICEF then got involved in five municipal projects, in the north and northeast of the country. In 1994, UNICEF started a campaign for the eradication of child labour at dump areas.

⁵ A figure that keeps changing, as the social reality keeps driving new children into working at the open dumps..

were analyzed in this study. The findings indicated that urban waste management was a very complex issue that could not be tackled properly by a municipal agency only. Also, the social aspects of waste picking were a fundamental problem that needed to be addressed. This meant that improvements in the area required strong coordination of various interrelated sectors: government – at local, state and national level – pickers' associations, NGOs and the private sector.

Therefore, in 1998, under the leadership of UNICEF, a National Forum was launched, comprising, initially, 19 entities, and with the following objectives:

- Eradication of child and adolescent labour at open dumps and their enrollment at schools.
- Eradication of open dumps, recovery of degraded areas and implementation of sanitary landfills.
- Promotion of partnerships between local governments and pickers' associations in recycling programmes.

The main strategies adopted by the National Forum were:

- National mobilization of multiple sectors of Brazilian society and coordination of actions and institutions towards the objectives set by the Forum.
- Encouragement for the creation of State and Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums throughout the country forming a network linking all levels (national, state and municipal forums).
- Identification, support and dissemination of successful experiences.
- Involvement of the Prosecutor's Office as a way to put pressure on mayors so that they can give priority to the issue.⁶
- Creation of a National Training Programme (for pickers, environmental agents, municipal staff, NGOs).
- Coordination of financing institutions towards the setting up of pre-conditions for municipalities, so that their commitment to the question of waste disposal and social inclusion of pickers is taken into account for the release of funding.



Pickers at a dumpsite

Some of the initial actions developed by the National Forum were: (1) a national mobilization campaign; (2) a pilot programme for the implementation of the first experiences of Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums in the country and (3) the development of a National Training Programme in Urban Waste Management.

The **national campaign** was called “**No more children in dump areas**” and was launched in June 1999 as a way to mobilize the attention of the population. The media gave it an unprecedented coverage. Therefore, the issue hit the headlines of the most influential newspapers. One of the strategies of the campaign was the national release, on the main TV channels, of a film showing the dreams of children working in the open dumps to have a respectable profession. This film had the participation of UNICEF's ambassador to Brazil, an acclaimed Brazilian artist – Mr. Renato Aragão. As part of the campaign strategy, a questionnaire was sent to all of the 5,507 mayors inquiring on the state of waste disposal in their city and a Letter of Commitment by which they could adhere to the “No more children in dump areas” campaign.

⁶ The role of the Prosecutor is to give a legal character to the commitment of municipalities to the question of waste disposal since the existing legislation makes clear that a mayor can be held responsible for the existence of child labour at open dumps. Therefore, this puts pressure on the municipalities towards eradication of open dumps and child labour.

Of the 5,507 mayors who received questionnaires, 25% filled them out⁷ and returned a signed Letter of Commitment. These municipalities later received a kit containing the following publications:

- The “Prosecutor’s Manual” dealing with the social and environmental aspects of recycling and an indication of Laws and Decrees related to the subject, as well as a draft of a “Term for Adjustment of Conduct” (TAC) to be confirmed between the Prosecutor’s Office and the mayors (issued by the Federal Prosecutor’s Office);
- The “Mayors’ Manual – Child, Waste Picker, Citizen”, containing a number of experiences of municipalities that had addressed this issue (produced by UNICEF);
- The “Waste Pickers’ Manual” – a course on recycling for waste pickers containing guidance on how to organize a cooperative (produced by the “Entrepreneurial Commitment for Recycling” – CEMPRE);
- The “Bolsa-Escola Manual” that has a 100 questions and answers about the “bolsa-escola”, a social programme⁸ designed to help families who keep their children at school (issued by the NGO “Missão Criança”);
- “The Selective Waste Collection Manual (produced by the Institute Polis);
- The “Financing Manual” that suggests how to obtain financial resources and loans for the implementations of integrated waste management systems.

As mentioned, one of the initial actions adopted by the Forum was the **strengthening of pickers’ organizations**. So, a pilot programme was devised and financed by UNICEF⁹ for the replication of the so-called ASMARE’s project in a municipality called Brumadinho, in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte City (southeast of Brazil), with the objective – through the organization of pickers – of convening the various local actors for the creation of the first Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forum in Brazil, in 1999.

The ASMARE – the Waste Picker Association of Belo Horizonte City – had become a kind of “model” for the possibilities within the solid waste management field for social inclusion for pickers in local government recycling programmes, since the City Hall started a partnership with it back in 1993.¹⁰

This pilot programme helped to give more visibility to the possibilities pickers have to put forward their demands for recognition when organized into associations and also the role a Forum might have on the strengthening of their organizations. Since then, the ASMARE got involved in many other projects¹¹ for replication of this approach (namely, organization of pickers and of Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums).

A **National Training Programme** was started whose innovative character lies in the coordination of the various sectors involved in waste management, where each part continued to take up its specific responsibility, though within a framework of integrated work which enabled each institution involved to acquire an overall



Street pickers-Nova Lima-MG

⁷ Most of them comprised cities with up to 25 thousand inhabitants and 11,244 children and adolescents were identified working and living in open dumps.

⁸ It is a means-tested benefit eligible only to families with incomes or assets below the minimum wage. Families who keep their children at school receive a monthly cash benefit whose value varies whether the benefit is provided by federal, state or municipal government.

⁹ With the support from the FEAM – (Minas Gerais State Agency responsible for environmental monitoring).

¹⁰ For more information on that see the paper “Integrating waste pickers for sustainable recycling”, CWG “Planning for Sustainable and Integrated Solid Waste Management” Workshop, Manila, Philippines, September 2000.

¹¹ With funding coming from various sources such as the InterAmerican Foundation, the Banco do Brasil Foundation etc

viewpoint of the problem. The institutions that joined the National Forum gathered in 1999 to map what training programmes they were already developing, and how the issue of waste & citizenship could be incorporated into them.

In sum, the creation of the National Forum stemmed from the necessity of creating a national mobilization involving multiple actors in an effort to overcome social and environmental problems within the waste sector. The support and initial co-ordination of UNICEF was fundamental to give credibility to the initiative due to its neutral position and its firm commitment to the eradication of child labour. This helped to reduce disputes that usually hinder initiatives like that. Later on the coordination of the National Forum was passed on from UNICEF to the NGO “Água e Vida” that was hired to function as the Executive Secretariat of the Forum. However, UNICEF’s initial leadership was decisive for bringing the issue to the spotlight and for smoothing the way towards a widespread consciousness of the importance of an integrated approach to urban wastes.

The country’s size, and its regional, cultural and physical peculiarities require the creation of state forums and, especially, municipal forums, where diverse government and non-governmental sectors coordinate their actions. State Waste & Citizenship Forums are taking shape throughout the country under the leadership of different institutions: in the Ceará State, for example, UNICEF’s Office took the leadership, in Minas Gerais and the Rio Grande do Sul, the Secretariats of the Environment of both states took the lead. There are 23 State Waste & Citizenship Forums implemented throughout the country. Following the example of the National Forum, State Waste & Citizenship Forums are expected to direct their actions towards:

- conducting research on the social and environmental problems of the state;
- mobilising society and municipalities towards integrated actions in SWM;
- encouraging the creation of and giving support to *Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums*;
- organising training programmes for the various actors (pickers’ associations, municipalities, NGOs);
- co-ordinating actions with the Prosecutor’s Office for infancy and for the environment;
- encouraging the creation of social programmes such as the “bolsa-escola” to help attract children away from work at the dump sites;
- searching for financial resources for the sector and monitoring their application.

As the actual management of wastes is done at the municipal level, the **Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums** are of foremost importance. They are expected to perform in the same way as the national and state forums. There are around 100 municipal forums throughout the country, according to information supplied by the National Forum.

3. Overall assessment of achievements of the National Forum

Assessments carried out under the coordination of the National Forum indicate that the approach has managed to capture people’s attention for the following reasons:

- the problems related to waste disposal affect everyone;
- the picture of a child in a dump area (the symbol of the whole waste & citizenship movement) is so powerful that it manages to raise people’s indignation and brings the ethical issues onto the agenda of debates;
- there is a growing consciousness about environmental problems and of the need to encourage recycling;
- the experiences of successful partnerships between municipalities and picker’s associations provide examples of alternative ways to address, simultaneously, the social and environmental issues;

- the fact that the whole movement started under the leadership of UNICEF gave it credibility in the eyes of the public, as well as in the eyes of government and non-governmental institutions engaged in the SWM.

Some positive impacts could be mentioned:

- An estimated **46.742 children**¹², nationwide, **left work at the dumps**. This was made possible by the cash benefits provided by the “bolsa-escola” programme given out, mainly, by the Programme for Eradication of Child Work (“PETI”), from the National Secretariat for Social Assistance of the federal government, (41.148 “bolsa-escolas”), from the NGO “Missão Criança” (1.482) – both partners of the National Forum – and also from municipalities (either from their own resources or from UNICEF’s).
- The National Forum, which was formed by 19 institutions, now has 56 entities with a balanced composition between government agencies and civil society. In 2002 the federal government (The Ministry of the Environment) established a covenant with the “Água e Vida” NGO (one of the initial partners of the Forum) to perform the role of Executive Secretariat of the National Forum.
- The National Forum encouraged the organization of pickers’ associations in many municipalities and this helped in the formation (and in the visibility) of the National Movement of Waste Pickers (formed in 2001), giving it a public status¹³.
- The Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of the Cities have included as a pre-condition for funding in the solid waste management field compliance with the social criteria set out by the National Forum.
- For the first time the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) included in the National Research on Basic Sanitation (PNBS)¹⁴, year 2000, aspects concerning the existence of pickers in dump areas. Around 24,340 pickers were identified¹⁵. Data from the 1989 research showed that only 10,7% of the municipalities disposed of their wastes in landfills, while the data available for the year 2000 was: 32,2% (half in sanitary landfills and half by controlled landfilling). This increase, says the report, was due to the strong performance of the Prosecutor’s Office and the increase in investments in the sector, all of these thanks to the influence of the National Waste & Citizenship Forum.

A project called **‘Interministerial Waste & Citizenship Project: fighting hunger with social inclusion of pickers and dump eradication** was launched by the federal government. This has represented a step forward towards the achievement of the status of public policy for the principles of the National Forum.

¹² Source: “Conquistas, Desafios e Perspectivas”, do Programa Nacional Lixo e Cidadania, realizado pela coordenação do Fórum Nacional Lixo e Cidadania com apoio do MMA/SQA e da AGÊNCIA da GTZ no Brasil. Dezembro/ 2002). Document available at: www.lixoecidadania.org.br

¹³ With the strengthening of the ASMARE over the years, not only at the local, but also at regional and national level, many municipalities and organizations became aware of the possibilities within the solid waste management field for social inclusion of waste pickers, with ASMARE taking a leadership role in what came to be known as the National Waste Pickers’ Movement. The National Waste Pickers’ Movement is a result of the joint effort of different regional and state-based organised experiences of pickers within the country and its main purpose is to achieve professional recognition for this social segment. 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, National Waste & Citizenship Forum, UNICEF, Universidade de Brasília, Pastoral de Rua, Ministry of the Environment, amongst others.

¹⁴ Questionnaires were applied to public and private institutions working in the sanitation sector (state and municipal companies, foundations, consortiums, private companies and community associations). Data are available at: www.ibge.org.br

¹⁵ It is worth pointing out that this figure might be underestimated as many municipalities do not provide exact information on this sensitive issue.

- In 2002, the activity of waste picking was included in the “classification of occupations”, gaining the status of a profession.
- The principles of the National Forum inspired the federal government in the elaboration of the “National Policy for Sanitation” Bill (still to be approved at the National Congress). If approved, this bill will represent a very important victory for the pickers, as it offers the legal framework for the establishments of partnerships between public administrations and pickers’ associations/cooperatives.
- The Ministry of the Cities created, recently (2005), a National Training Programme¹⁶ in cooperation with leading federal universities across the country to give support to the municipalities in the implementation of integrated approaches on solid waste management.
- Stronger coordination amongst the different federal financing programmes has taken place, as well as its reformulation to incorporate the principles of the National Fórum. Between 2000 and 2002 the Federal Government invested up to US\$ 188 million in SWM projects. The Ministry of the Environment opened up, in 2003, a special line of funding (US\$ 2,6 million) for pickers’ cooperatives.

4. The Waste & Citizenship Forum of Minas Gerais State



The symbol of the Waste & Citizenship Fórum of Minas Gerais State

The Waste & Citizenship Forum of Minas Gerais State was created in 1999, under the leadership of the State Secretariat for the Environment. The State Forum is comprised of 15 entities, amongst them: the ASMARE (Belo Horizonte’s Pickers’ Association), the Professional Council of Engineers and Architects, the State Prosecutor’s Office, The State Technological Research Foundation, the Superintendency of Public Cleansing of Belo Horizonte City, Caritas, the “Pastoral de Rua”¹⁷.

Since its creation the State Forum has been a very active supporter of the organization of pickers and has played a major role in assisting municipalities to implement integrated waste management systems.

Some positive impacts could be singled out since its creation:

- The State Secretariat for the Environment has set out a financial incentive¹⁸ for the municipalities that support pickers’ associations and the eradication of open dumps.
- A Decree (DN 67) was passed on that makes the creation of alternative projects for pickers, mandatory for municipalities when closing an open dump.
- The State Forum has backed the organization of four Waste & Citizenship Festivals – events organized by the ASMARE for which pickers’ associations, staff from government agencies and NGOs from all over the country have gathered every year since 2002, to evaluate progress on the waste & citizenship movement. The 2005 Festival assembled nearly 2,000 people.
- A comprehensive training programme was devised by the State Secretariat on the principles of the waste & citizenship movement for the municipalities.
- Twenty two (22) **municipal waste & citizenship** forums throughout the state were created and 9 are in the process of implementation. Preliminary data from a research¹⁹ about the existing forums has showed that: before the existence of municipal forums, 71% of the 22 municipalities

¹⁶ “Rede Nacional de Capacitação e Extensão Tecnológica em Saneamento Ambiental”.

¹⁷ A group from the Catholic Church that develops a social work with street dwellers and pickers

¹⁸ “ICMS ecológico” (Ecological Tax).

¹⁹ This research has been conducted by the State Forum with the objective of finding out the achievements and limitations of the forums on local level. Data is still being compiled.

involved disposed their wastes in open dumps, a figure that dropped to 19% after its implementation; 95% of these municipalities have managed to form pickers' associations.

- The **first plastic recycling unit managed by waste pickers** (for the production of pellets) has been inaugurated (October 2005), integrating the pickers' associations of 8 municipalities within the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte City, under the leadership of the ASMARE association, with backing from some of the institutions that integrate the State.²⁰

5. Assessments of limitations and challenges

There is a general consensus about the innovative character of the approach developed by the Waste & Citizenship Forums. Nevertheless, many challenges remain.

To be able to have a long-lasting effect, Waste & Citizenship Forums need to evolve into Waste & Citizenship Councils (at national, state and municipal levels). The 1988 Brazilian Constitution has incorporated policy-making institutional arrangements - called Councils for Public Policies²¹ -, which have deliberative powers, meaning that decisions taken in its ambit must be enforced. Although the existence of the Waste & Citizenship forum has been able to bring about many achievements in the area of solid waste management,, there is a widespread feeling that the implementation of the waste & citizenship principles needs a stronger legal backing so as to be able to consolidate progress made, requiring the evolution into Councils.

Achievements cannot rely, only on the political will of politicians and on the mobilisation of society. It is expected that the "National Policy for Sanitation" Bill might play an important role towards the consolidation of the legal support needed for the approach put forward by the National Forum, but this is still insufficient.

As stated in an internal document evaluation²², one of the difficulties faced is the assessment of the real situation about the eradication of child labour at disposal sites, as the National Forum only has access to the information concerning the number of the "bolsa-escolas" distributed to the families. Reliable data on the number of new children (and their families) driven to work at disposal sites are still not available. Also, the cash benefit given out by the "bolsa-escola" programme is only a small contribution to the solution of the problem, as access to work has to be guaranteed for the adult pickers leaving work at disposal sites.

The whole process of organising the waste pickers into associations or cooperatives, as well as the creation of Waste & Citizenship Forums in the municipalities, is very slow. Around 100 Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums have been created, so far, in the whole country out of 5,507 municipalities. This



A seminar organized by the Municipal Waste & Citizenship Fórum of Paracatu City (Minas Gerais State)

²⁰ This recycling unit has had financial backing from the Municipal Administration of Belo Horizonte, the InterAmerican Foundation, the Banco do Brasil Foundation.

²¹ Since the 1988 Constitution many Councils for Public Policies were created in areas, such as health, housing, children's welfare. Their composition and procedures are stated in Bills. These Councils have representatives from both governments and the civil society.

²² "Conquistas, Desafios e Perspectivas", do Programa Nacional Lixo e Cidadania, realizado pela coordenação do Fórum Nacional Lixo e Cidadania com apoio do MMA/SQA e da AGÊNCIA da GTZ no Brasil. Dezembro/2002.

is still an unimpressive figure if assessment is made only on the quantitative aspect. What the experience has shown, when qualitative evaluation is taken into consideration, is that this approach has potentials - yet to be made more effective, it must depend on more social mobilization and the availability of financial resources.

Another difficulty is the lack of business skills of existing pickers' cooperatives/associations, due mainly to the deficit in formal education of their associates (most of them being former street dwellers)²³. This characteristic brings about many difficulties, such as uneven quality of sorted recyclables sold by them and lack of administrative skills. Another difficulty is that the Brazilian legislation is very restrictive when it comes to special funding lines for cooperatives, which makes it extremely hard for pickers' cooperatives to get financial resources for machinery, for example. Another threat is the trend towards the privatisation of the sanitation sector. It is widely believed that "modernization" in the waste sector means privatisation, which, generally, means fewer opportunities for the informal sector.

A further challenge is the shortage of resources for a more "professional" activism by the existing forums (at state and municipal levels), meaning: their lack of an executive secretariat for planning of actions and assessments of achievements and limitations; their lack of proper infrastructure and a communication system. Many existing forums still rely too much on voluntary work.

There is, also, a need of a comprehensive evaluation, especially, on the existing Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums to investigate whether they are really making a difference in solid waste management in a sustainable manner.

Two other important questions have, also, to be researched. The first concerns how sensitive the forum movement is to political changes? The second is whether the forums are structured so that there are no big temptations to corruption and use for political influence. We can only come up with provisional answers to these questions at this stage. As for the first question, experience has shown that political changes can affect policies dramatically, for the better and for the worse. Therefore, continuity of policies depends largely on a combination of political will from decision-makers and the strong social mobilisation of society. As for the second question, the forums are not directly responsible for any financial resources for the projects it puts forward, so strictly speaking there is little room for corruption. Yet, there is a pressing need for a thorough investigation, as already stated, on the dynamics of some of the existing forums, so that these opinions can be validated.

6. Conclusions

The waste & citizenship movement is expanding, in spite of all the challenges it has to face. The results shown above have demonstrated the potential of an integrated approach to the social and environmental problems facing the waste sector.

The achievements so far have shown its potential for contributing to poverty reduction. This requires, however, a great deal more investment – in terms of both financial resources and social mobilization. It also requires a thorough evaluation of its impacts, especially on the municipal level.

A lesson to be learnt from the experience is that the coordinated efforts of multiple sectors are fundamental to making a difference when it comes to bringing relief in the hardships faced by informal recyclers – the waste pickers. Another lesson is that participatory channels, such as the Waste & Citizenship Forums, play an important role in the empowerment of the poor and in the spreading of good governance.

²³ Although this seems to be changing, as many unemployed people are being driven into the activity of waste picking.

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