

Executive Summary: Waste Pickers in Bogotá, Colombia

Recent statistics show the majority of workers in developing countries earn their livelihoods in the informal economy. The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) is a qualitative and quantitative study designed to evaluate the reality for these workers. With research conducted over three years in 10 cities, the IEMS aims to provide credible, grounded evidence of the range of driving forces, both positive and negative, that affect working conditions in the informal economy over time. Informal workers and their membership-based organizations (MBOs) are at the centre of the analysis.

The Research in Bogotá

In Bogotá, the IEMS research was undertaken with membership-based organizations that form part of the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (Waste Pickers' Association of Bogotá; ARB by its acronym in Spanish). Two variables were used to select the sample of 152 informal workers: 1) sex; and 2) source of materials, with the latter variable divided into those who collect recyclables on fixed sources and those who collect them on the streets. For the quantitative component of the research, all participants answered a survey, and for the qualitative component, 75 workers participated in 15 focus groups.

In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from the ARB and the recycling industry as a means of further exploring issues that arose from the study.

The sample was composed in the following way: 52 per cent women and 48 per cent men who work as professional waste pickers. According to the research data, many of the households of those interviewed were highly dependent upon informal employment (71%). However, the households of women surveyed tend to rely even more on informal employment than those of men (73 %).

From the sample, only a small percentage of the respondents had completed high school – 9 per cent of men and 6 per cent of women – which reflects the obstacles facing these groups to access education, or to attain higher levels of education. The study highlights the vulnerability of the professional waste pickers in terms of their livelihoods and in terms of their ability to respond to the challenges posed by the negative driving forces that impact their occupation.



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Research Findings from Bogotá

During the research, the waste pickers ranked and discussed factors that helped and hindered their pursuit of an income. The study findings revealed that the ARB, as an MBO, plays a key role in the waste pickers' struggle for their rights and for recognition of their contributions to society at large, and to the environment. The ARB is a cohesive force for waste pickers. Links with other groups and institutions, like the Constitutional Court, and more recently with other actors in the recycling value chain, like the Recycling Sector Pact (*Pacto Gremial Reciclador*), have been relevant for waste pickers in their struggle for their rights, their survival, and recognition of their occupation. Waste pickers also mentioned the support received from other organizations in the area of skills development.

The driving forces that affect negatively the work of waste pickers are mainly those related to city/government policies and practices, and to the dynamics of the value chain.

City/Government Policies and Practices

Waste pickers participating in the study, both in the survey and in the focus groups, highlighted the relevance of the Constitutional Court in reverting waste pickers' exclusion and defending their rights and their occupation, and in particular securing their access to public tenders. Resulting from ARB's ongoing advocacy strategy and its aspirations to attain recognition for their work and status as workers, the pronouncements of the Constitutional Court have paved the way for the recognition of waste pickers by the municipal government and the Special Administrative Unit of Public Services of Bogotá (UAESP, by its acronym in Spanish), which was materialized in Decree 564 of 2012. This recognition is illustrated by the payment system to remunerate waste pickers for their services in the areas of collection, transport and recycling incentives that was launched in March 2013. By October 2014, this system had benefitted 2,300 of the almost 14,000 waste pickers that were identified in the census. However, findings from the surveys and the focus groups show that professional waste pickers continue to perceive the need for ongoing struggle given that most government institutions are biased towards privatization and the use of large private service providers, especially those with political connections. Focus group participants also think that regulations exclude them and are not easy to understand. They assert, however, that the exclusion from policies and regulations has contributed to fostering organization among waste pickers and the establishment of alliances with other groups within the recycling value chain, with whom they had conflictive relationships in the past – e.g. the Recycling Sector Pact.

IEMS participants also expressed concern about the prohibitive costs they have to assume if they want to establish a contractual relationship with the



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municipality or with private firms, including the registration with the tax agency and compliance with existing entrepreneurial regulations (invoicing, social security contributions, etc.). In addition to these costs, participants in the study mentioned other types of costs to secure access to recyclables, namely the so-called “exchange of services” (or *contraprestaciones*). The exchange of services can include payments in kind (goods and/or services) or in cash and are demanded by the administrators of the fixed sources to grant waste pickers access to recyclable materials. As one participant stated: “The majority of administrators state that as compensation [to them], [waste pickers] need to clean garbage containers and garbage chutes and [pay up] 15 per cent.”

They also reported being victims of discrimination by the authorities and society at large, and being perceived as outlaws and criminals just because they are poor. This negative perception acts in detriment to the recognition for the overall contributions waste pickers make. It also fosters abuses by the authorities and other actors within the value chain.

Value Chain Dynamics

Regarding value chain dynamics, the IEMS found linkages between these informal workers and the formal economy. In fact, various actors and beneficiaries of this value chain operate in the formal economy – 98 per cent of respondents reported having formal businesses as costumers when selling recyclables, whereas only 37 per cent reported informal businesses as costumers.

Also, the recycling value chain is immersed in global dynamics and is, therefore, affected by macroeconomic forces. Some of the macroeconomic forces mentioned in the focus groups as negatively affecting waste pickers include: the economic downturn in the US and European economies, increased competition due to trade liberalization policies and the entry into force of the free trade agreement with the US. All of these had a negative

impact on the market for recyclable materials, resulting in a stark price fluctuation. Price instability was identified by the IEMS participants as one of the factors that affect them the most, since it forces them to double their efforts to maintain turnover and/or to reduce their expenses, including in food.

Access to recyclable materials, however, was the main concern for waste pickers participating in the study. Those collecting materials at fixed sources reported having more security in terms of access, compared with those collecting materials on the streets. However, one of the findings of the focus groups was that the differentiation between these two groups is blurred: waste pickers seem to alternate between fixed sources and the streets on weekends, on days when collecting at the source is unavailable and to complement their income.

Access to materials is uncertain even for those working at a fixed source. A main reason given for this was increased competition for recyclables due to the entry of new actors. This is the result of the higher rates of unemployment, the arrival of people displaced by armed conflict, and the entry of private firms into recycling. They also emphasized that with the establishment by the municipality of collection routes, they faced competition for the materials from private service providers.

To face these challenges, this group of waste pickers has found, through social mobilization and political advocacy, a democratic path to discuss and position their struggle. The ARB has also emphasized the creation of alliances with diverse national and international actors, and more recently also with actors within the value chain.

Another line of action of the ARB has been the development of skills of waste pickers, through a process of certification and support to the professionalization of the occupation. They also work in the strengthening of their member organizations.

All of this has served to position ARB as an interlocutor with diverse decision-making entities at the local and national level. In this role, ARB attempts to look for recognition, in more equitable terms, for waste pickers as operators in the cleansing component within public solid waste management systems, and important actors in efforts to mitigate environmental problems.

The set of measures taken at the institutional level have led to the creation of social and human capital that is essential to overcome the difficulties and obstacles in the participation in the value chain and the development of laws. It also allows for the redefinition of links between waste pickers and authorities, and between waste pickers and society in more positive terms.



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Policy recommendations and Advocacy

This report demonstrates that the main negative forces affecting waste pickers' livelihoods include the lack of certainty in access to recyclables, price instability of those materials in the market, and authorities' reluctance to recognize the value of the services waste pickers provide. In addition to these problems, some of the survey participants also mentioned negative factors such as police harassment, the costs that they have to incur to perform their work, like buying their work tools, and having to provide services to the administrators of the sources. They also complained of inadequate separation of waste by the citizenry, and flagged general discrimination by the public as a major issue.

Most of the participants in the survey mentioned that government policies and practices represent a negative driving force because these exert pressure that prevent access to waste and, as a result, prevents waste pickers from performing their job. Further, participants said that tendering processes – used to mask bias in public policy – are not transparent. In the case of regulations, participants said that regulations, which determine the parameters of what waste pickers could and could not do, are not clear. Finally, participants also highlighted as a negative force the increasing privatization of waste management services without protection of the traditional waste picking sector.

Although resolution of these issues will need to come from comprehensive policies that go beyond the scope of this report, listed below are some policy recommendations for the city's solid waste management plan:

- Now that the pronouncements from the Honourable Constitutional Court have established a shift in the perception of, and provided solutions to public waste issues that include the recognition of waste pickers as key

actors in the recuperation of recyclables, such recognition should permeate all public policies related to waste management.

- The following aspects should be the structural pillars of the public policy approach: secure and guaranteed access to recyclable materials, security for professional waste pickers to remain in the profession, incentives to move upwards in the value chain, and recognition of a payment system for cleansing and environmental services, which should be reserved exclusively for waste pickers as mandated by verdicts of the writ of protection coming from the tribunals and as part of the implementation of the orders of the Constitutional Court of Colombia. The latter has protected waste picking as an occupation and has issued measures that are binding for government institutions so that the pertinent actions for recognition and social, technical and economic inclusion are put in place.
- The implementation of the above mentioned policy approach should contribute to the establishment of a recycling scheme that is developed by its traditional and natural actors within the value chain. The objective would be to develop actions to make them visible and to measure them, which would gradually lead to a greater level of formalization of this occupation. It would also help to establish the path to modernization by adjusting the public cleansing system to models that are increasingly organized around social and technical issues and that are consistent with the regulatory framework and the promotion of the Zero Waste city model proposed within the municipality's government plan.
- Waste pickers should seek remuneration for public and environmental services rendered based on cleansing services and indicators of their contributions to the environment. The combination of the remuneration for services with the sale of materials is a step forward



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towards achieving social, environmental and economic sustainability of this occupation and the recognition of waste pickers as valid and historical actors in solid waste management.

- To respond to fluctuations in the recyclables market, waste pickers need to organize themselves and develop their own value recycling processes in order to attain more equal redistribution of the revenues generated in the value chain. This would also enable their organizations' and livelihoods' sustainability. To achieve this, waste pickers' organizations need to work in engaging industry directly to increase the sale price of recyclables and to obtain any other type of support that the industry may offer them to improve sustainability.
- The city should create public awareness campaigns on the important social and environmental contribution that these workers make and the hurdles they face to deal with public discrimination.



Inclusive Cities: Launched in 2008, the Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organizing, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes. Inclusive Cities is a collaboration between MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs and those supporting the work of MBOs.

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