

Chapter 3: Combining Forces – Networks and Federations of Waste Picker Organisations

Organised waste pickers are starting to forge relationships across cities, countries, continents and the globe in order to strengthen their collective struggles. In this chapter we provide overviews of initiatives to unite waste picker organisations at municipal, national, continental and global levels. The stories profile these important developments, provide insight into how and why these networks and relationships have been forged, and highlight the challenges encountered in doing so.

The following questions should be kept in mind when reading this chapter:

- What are the objectives of the different networks and federations?
- What are the advantages of forming networks, federations and alliances?
- What are some key problems and challenges that need to be confronted by waste pickers when forming and sustaining networks?

Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB), Colombia *by Melanie Samson*



Alqueria Recycling Centre, Bogota

(photo by Chris Bonner).

Colombia has one of the oldest movements of waste picker co-operatives in the world. The *Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá* (ARB) was formed in 1990 when four co-operatives that had been fighting the closure of a dump in Bogotá, Colombia decided to formalise their relationship. They were assisted in this process by the

Fundación Social, a foundation that played a pivotal role in catalysing and supporting the formation of *recicladores* co-operatives across the country. The *Fundación Social* provided the ARB and its member co-operatives with advice, training, grants and loans until it was forced to cancel its support programme in 1996 due to financial problems (Medina 2007, 156-159).²²

The ARB is registered as an association of co-operatives working in the municipality of Bogotá. When it was first established, the ARB was governed by a board of ten people whose members were drawn from the member co-operatives. Its first tasks were to identify other *recicladores*, help them to form co-operatives and then encourage these co-operatives to join the ARB. Today 24 co-operatives are members of the ARB. Each member co-operative sends four delegates to the ARB Assembly that governs the association's activities. The ARB Board has seven members. An Administrative Council of nine people is responsible for its day-to-day activities.

The ARB seeks to promote and strengthen the organisation of *recicladores*, defend their common interests, improve their working conditions and gain social and economic recognition for their work. The ARB has a three-year agreement with the municipality that covers 10% of the Bogotá area. Municipal trucks collect recyclables that residents have separated out from their garbage and deliver these to a centre where members of ARB-affiliated co-operatives sort the recyclables, press them and sell them to factories. The workers are each employed for six months by the ARB. They receive a salary, social security, medical aid, pensions and access to occupational health and safety services.

The ARB also engages at the level of policy and legislation. Aided by professionals who provide free support, the ARB has conducted a number of studies to demonstrate the social, economic and environmental contributions of *recicladores*. With the assistance of pro bono lawyers, the ARB successfully challenged the constitutionality of legal provisions that prevented co-operatives from bidding for contracts to provide door-to-door services.²³

According to Nohra Padilla, the formation of an association has been critically important for *recicladores* in Bogotá. As she explains, "It helps to prevent the exclusion of *recicladores* by uniting the co-operatives in a common struggle. Each separate group is fragile and vulnerable, but together we have weight and the capacity to fight." The ARB has deepened and extended this capacity by helping to found the national association in Colombia, having a representative on the governing body of the Latin American network, and hosting the First World Congress of Waste Pickers.

South Africa's First National Waste Picker Meeting by Melanie Samson

On July 2 and 3, 2009, 100 waste pickers from across the country gathered for South Africa's First National Waste Picker Meeting. The waste pickers came from 26 landfills

²² Additional information from interview with Nohra Padilla, 14/01/2009.

²³ Personal communication with Adriana Ruiz-Restrepo; Interview with Nohra Padilla, 14/01/2009. See Chapter 5 for further information on the court case.

in seven of South Africa's nine provinces. Speaking at a plenary session, waste picker Simon Mbata emphasised that the meeting was "making history" as it was "the first time we see waste pickers in South Africa together deciding our future."

The meeting was organised by the environmental justice NGO groundWork, which has a long history of working with communities affected by hazardous and toxic waste. In 2008 it began to work with waste pickers after realising that they are also negatively affected by poor waste management practices. In addition, groundWork was concerned that the new waste management legislation being drafted did not recognise the role of waste pickers in municipal waste management and threatened to undermine their livelihood, as did trends toward incineration of municipal waste. Musa Chamane, the groundWork waste campaigner, spent eight months traveling to dumps in all of South Africa's nine provinces to make links with waste pickers. In preparation for the national meeting, he facilitated provincial workshops that introduced the waste pickers to groundWork, reported on groundWork's research on waste pickers and identified key issues faced by waste pickers. Representatives from all the dumps visited by groundWork were then invited to the National Meeting, held in Midrand, Gauteng.

While groundWork is keen to support the organising of waste pickers, it is clear that this initiative must be driven by the waste pickers themselves. The organisation sees its role as facilitating opportunities for waste pickers to meet and engage, and providing information and support to help waste pickers organise themselves. According to groundWork, the main objective of the national meeting was to provide the opportunity for waste pickers throughout South Africa to meet and engage with each other in order to promote collective organising for securing their livelihoods.

Waste pickers who attended the meeting made great sacrifices to be there. As they are self-employed, they all forfeited two days of work when they could have been generating income. Province after province reported in plenary that they had come in order to create stronger links with other waste pickers, and in the process of doing so, to learn new strategies about how to forward their own struggles. They also hoped that collectively they would be able to address the discrimination that they face and lobby government for recognition.

Running a national meeting in South Africa is not an easy task. South Africa has eleven official languages, and at least seven were spoken during the conference. Facilitators and participants pulled together to ensure that everyone could communicate and participate. A team of multilingual facilitators translated every point made in plenary into English, isiZulu and seSotho. As isiZulu and seSotho are from the two main language groups in South Africa they can be understood by most African language speakers in the country. At times participants spoke languages that the facilitators could not translate, and in these cases other participants who spoke their language quickly volunteered to translate for them. These skills were crucial in the breakaway sessions, where the translation process highlighted not only the valuable language abilities of the waste pickers but also bridged linguistic and cultural divides between them. The waste pickers were brought closer together not

only because they could share ideas and experiences, but also because they relied on each other to do so.

Meeting delegates discussed and debated a wide range of issues. They identified the health risks associated with their work and argued that is the responsibility of the state to provide them with protective clothing and to ensure that medical and toxic waste are not dumped at municipal landfills. Waste pickers from a number of cities reported that they were being evicted from dumps as contracts were being given to private companies. They identified that one of their key challenges was:

... to resist privatisation of our resources, both at the landfill site and upstream, and to ensure our right to work and to resist exclusion from the landfill sites where we derive our livelihoods.

They also resolved to “develop strategies to ensure that the exploitative practice of middlemen is permanently destroyed.”

Workshop delegates identified that collective organisation will be key to achieving all of these objectives. Most of the delegates came from dumps that did not have formal organisations. They were particularly inspired by a plenary session in which waste pickers who have succeeded in organising both co-operatives in their dumps and city-wide alliances provided insight into how they had achieved these successes. After hearing of their accomplishments, the delegates resolved that they would try to build organisations on all of the dumps. For, as the breakaway group focusing on organising noted, “it is only where waste pickers are united that we see them advancing,” and, “the municipality will not listen to an individual, but it will listen to a collective.” The meeting came up with a number of suggestions regarding how to convince other waste pickers to see the benefits of organising. Key amongst these was the idea of running local workshops where more experienced waste pickers from other cities can share their experiences.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the delegates elected a national working group with one representative from each province to take this agenda forward. Because waste pickers also face problems related to housing, education and access to services, the delegates resolved to “work with other community organisations to take forward our collective struggles.”

The National Meeting was an important first step that has altered the landscape in South Africa. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done to make future processes even more inclusive. Despite the fact that women were active participants in the meeting and gave the majority of reports from breakaway groups, only one of the working group members elected at the conference was a woman. Two provinces were not present and only a small number of waste pickers working in the streets attended the meeting. Although many foreign migrants work as waste pickers in cities across the country, none were present at the workshop. Some participants felt that excluding foreign nationals from dumps would be a way to address concerns about overcrowding. As the working group moves forward, there will be a need to explore how to overcome exclusions and divisions and to ensure that all waste pickers can participate and have a voice in the emerging national processes.



Delegates at the First National Waste Picker Meeting

(photo by groundWork)

The SWACHH National Alliance of Waste Pickers, India by the Central Secretariat, KKP KP

Efforts to work with waste pickers started in the late 1990s in different parts of India. These were usually modest experiments that in some cases gradually grew to be city-wide. The groups working with waste pickers included NGOs, university departments and trade unions. They typically initiated work with either children or adult women waste pickers.

The approach of working with waste pickers (originally referred to as rag pickers) depended on the orientation of the group's founders and their philosophies. A number of groups involved in gender justice issues started working with waste pickers when they identified that a large number of women worked in this sector were in extremely vulnerable positions. Some struggles and movements that address discrimination based on caste identified waste pickers as the most vulnerable within their own caste. For their part, workers' groups organised waste pickers with the intention of obtaining recognition of them as workers, as they were not even in the hierarchy of labour. Finally, groups interested in environmental issues identified waste pickers as contributing to the protection of the environment, and began to support protection of their rights.

Experiments in providing access to dry recyclable waste at source were carried out in a few cities with the hope of improving the working conditions of waste workers. In some cities, experiments like collective scrap stores were tried, while in others there was an effort to offer waste pickers training to move to other work opportunities.

Nationally the groups interacted with each other to exchange ideas, discuss strategies and visit each other to learn. These interactions were very informal and happened organically as per member needs.

It was only in March 2005 that a group of eight organisations met and decided to forge an alliance and form a network called SWACHH. The organisations in the national network come from a number of different states in India including Bihar, Delhi, Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. While most of the groups are from metros and big cities in India, some come from smaller cities.

SWACHH is not a registered body as the groups have decided to allow the national network to grow organically. The KKP KP trade union of waste pickers in Pune currently functions as the secretariat for SWACHH. In December 2008, with the help of donor funding, a co-ordinator was hired, who works out of the secretariat of the KKP KP in Pune. All the meetings organised so far have been non-funded, meaning that all organisations have been willing to invest their time, energy and money to nurture the national network.

Twenty-four organisations are members of SWACHH. These include organisations of waste pickers as well as organisations that work with waste pickers. While some of them are member-based organisation like registered trade unions or co-operatives, most are NGOs registered as public trusts or societies. Some of the organisations have set up co-operatives or companies that complement their activities as a trust, society or union. There seems to be an increasing trend to use business entities owned and run by waste pickers. Almost all the organisations work in Tier I (metros) and Tier II cities (million plus population), although there are also some efforts underway in smaller towns.

The agenda for working together is driven by the needs of the day and includes responding to changing environments that affect the waste pickers' work. One of the main achievements of 2008 was the drafting of a national policy for solid waste management as a group. Efforts in 2009 will include advocating for its implementation with the various ministries that deal with municipal waste management.

In 2009 SWACHH collected national-level information on the scrap prices that were affected by the recession in the market. SWACHH is in the process of collecting data on different systems used by the groups to collect waste from household and business establishments. This documentation will help the group to exchange ideas and will assist newer members to explore what works in their own context. SWACHH is also investigating the possibility of providing health insurance for all waste pickers.

Efforts planned for the future include:

- Exploring whether it is possible to develop a methodology to determine carbon credits for waste pickers
- Providing access to financial and other experts for groups who would like to get assistance to further their projects
- Facilitating exchanges of waste pickers and their organisers to other groups in the country to promote the sharing of experiences.

The diversity of the groups in terms of geographical location and level of work pose challenges of organising in general. The mode and language for communication are particular challenges.

Each of the cities has a unique situation, with different levels of understanding of solid waste management and particular strategies of working with waste pickers. This lends itself to a creative tension when attempting to further the network. It also keeps the agenda of waste pickers alive, and ensures that the constant evolution of strategies is in their best interest.

Some key issues for debate within SWACHH revolve around gender discrimination. Traditionally, the waste pickers in most cities have been women. Projects to implement door-to-door collection often involve the use of bicycles, tricycles or travelling on trucks, and due to gender stereotypes and assumptions regarding who should use such vehicles, many groups have chosen to work with men connected with waste pickers' families once these modes of transportation have been introduced. This has pushed the women waste pickers out of the sector. Some of the groups have trained women to use bicycles or tricycles, which has been an empowering process. However, it is time-consuming to provide training, change attitudes and increase acceptance of different ways of working. This remains a heavily debated area of strategy.

Organisational forms have often been a subject of debate among the national groups. While some groups feel that workers' associations and unions form a stronger link to the issue, and that participation of workers themselves in their struggles is central, others are exploring alternative forms of organisation such as trusts, societies and registration under the Companies Act in order to complement the workers' movement. There is also a move towards registering the group in multiple ways to address the growing needs of the organisation and respond to market changes.

The national network is in a phase of exploring strategies to work towards common agendas and to address the needs of waste pickers in specific cities. This is just the beginning of efforts at the national level – there is much scope for organisations to learn from each other, forge an alliance on common issues, lend support and collaborate in city level struggles.

Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis (MNCR), Brazil *by Melanie Samson*



(photo from www.mnccr.org.br)

Brazil's *Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis* (MNCR) or National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials is currently the largest national movement of waste pickers in the world (Medina 2007, 82). The organising of *catadores* in Brazil dates back to the late 1980s when the *Pastoral de Rua* of the Catholic Church began facilitating this process in various municipalities. When the Workers' Party gained power in a number of local councils it played a critical role in supporting existing co-operatives of *catadores*, promoting the formation of new co-operatives where they did not already exist and creating formal partnerships with co-operatives to implement source segregation programmes. The presence of sympathetic individuals in key positions also helped to ensure that the inclusion of *catadores* became part of the Workers' Party's broader agenda of transforming the state (Dias and Alves 2008, 8-9, 65). The existence of a receptive governing party and supportive bureaucrats, first in local and later in national governments, has been important for creating an enabling environment for the development of a strong, national movement of *catadores* in Brazil.

In 1998 a major advance was seen at the national level when UNICEF helped to create a National Waste and Citizenship Forum. This forum brings together key stakeholders to look at issues such as how to stop children from working as *catadores*, improve the status and conditions of *catadores*, strengthen their organisations, promote partnerships between municipalities and co-operatives of *catadores*, and encourage the formation of Waste and Citizenship Forums at state and local levels (Dias and Alves 2008, 9-11).

The first concrete moves towards the formation of a national movement of *catadores* were made in the same period. Also in 1998, the Federation of Recyclers' Associations of the Rio Grande do Sul State (FARRGS) was created to put forward the demands of *catadores* in that state. The First National Meeting of *Catadores* was held in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in November, 1999. This meeting was organised by the National

Forum of Studies on Street Dwellers with the support of the *Pastoral de Rua*, the Belo Horizonte municipal administration and many other organisations (Dias and Alves 2008, 9-10). In June 2001, the National Movement of *Catadores* (MNCR) was founded by the more than 1,700 *catadores* who attended the first National Congress of *Catadores* held in Brasilia (www.mnccr.org.br).



MNCR Brazil, march against privatisation

(photo by Fabiana Goulart)

The MNCR is a social movement committed to organising and advancing the interests of *catadores*. It views *catadores* as workers who must be recognised and valued for the important work that they perform. The MNCR believes that *catadores* must be integrated formally into municipal waste management systems and compensated for the work that they do. It promotes collective – as opposed to individual – advancement and argues that *catadores* should work in a co-operative manner that does not create hierarchies and inequalities between them. The MNCR supports initiatives by co-operatives of *catadores* to move up the recycling value chain and take increasing control over their own work as well as the sale and processing of their products.

The MNCR is guided by a number of key principles, including:

- Control of the organisation by *catadores*
- Direct democracy and collective decision-making within the organisation
- Direct action, which is a means to guard against apathy, and the expectation that others will bring about change and ensure active involvement in struggle

- Independence as a class from government, political parties and entrepreneurs
- Recognition that differences exist within the movement, but a commitment to ensure that these do not divide the MNCR.

The MNCR has a class analysis of society and sees *catadores* as part of the broader class of the oppressed. It believes that it cannot achieve its goals in isolation and that true victory requires a profound transformation in society to eradicate the power relations and inequalities that divide society into the oppressors and the oppressed, the rich and the poor. The MNCR is therefore committed to building solidarity with social movements in Brazil, and beyond that to advance the struggle of the oppressed class (www.mnccr.org.br).

The MNCR is governed by democratic structures that are rooted in the member organisations. Each co-operative or association elects a representative onto a regional committee. Delegates from the regional committees are elected to participate in committees that are formed within each state. The state committees each send two delegates to Regional Commissions that are formed in the south, southeast, central, central west, north and northeast regions of Brazil. The main decision-making body of the MNCR is the National Commission which has 37 members elected from the State Committees. The National Articulation Committee has seven representatives from the National Commission. It is charged with co-ordinating the activities of the MNCR's various structures (Fernandez 2008). The MNCR has a national office in São Paulo and employs two staff associates. However, as noted above, the MNCR is firmly committed to the principle that *catadores* must control the organisation through democratic processes.

More than 500 co-operatives from across Brazil are now affiliated to the MNCR (www.mnccr.org.br). Whilst this is a significant number, the MNCR is aware that it is only a fraction of the existing registered co-operatives, which number over 3,500. The MNCR therefore has a proactive campaign to recruit more affiliates. New members benefit from political education that covers issues such as the definition of a movement; the class nature of the MNCR; *catadores*, informal traders and street-dwellers as part of the urban poor; and the common interest of organisations of the urban poor in public policies (Horn 2008).²⁴

Shack/Slum Dwellers International – Facilitating Waste Picker Exchanges in Africa *by Melanie Samson*

There are presently no networks or federations of waste pickers that span the African continent. However, Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) has facilitated

²⁴ For further information on the MNCR, please see www.mnccr.org.br as well as the presentation by Severino Lima Junior at the First World Conference of Waste Pickers, which can be found at http://www.recicladores.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=77&Itemid=143.

exchanges between waste pickers in South Africa, Kenya and Egypt that have helped to forge links and promote the sharing of experiences between African waste pickers.²⁵

The NGO Community Organisation Resource Centre (CORC) is a South African affiliate of SDI, and until recently it hosted the SDI Secretariat. SDI was formed in the early 1990s to promote exchanges between slum dwellers (as they are referred to by SDI) in South Africa and India. It is currently a network of community-based organisations and slum dweller organisations in more than 30 countries. SDI promotes what it calls ‘horizontal learning’ and trans-national communication and alliance building between marginalised urban people. A key component of SDI’s approach is to encourage the formation of savings groups by local communities to help build solidarity and generate funds for building houses. In recent years CORC identified a need to pro-actively address the problems of the urban poor in other areas of service delivery in addition to housing. Waste management services emerged as a key issue due to the extremely limited nature of service provision for slum and shack dwellers. It also became apparent to CORC that some groups were generating income from the sale of recyclables, and that this could be a strategic way to increase money available for savings and other activities.

CORC was aware that the *zabbaleen* (informal waste collectors) in Cairo, Egypt have developed a particularly advanced informal recycling system²⁶ and felt that other African waste pickers could benefit from drawing on their experiences. In December 2004, CORC undertook an exploratory trip to visit the *zabbaleen* in Egypt. In 2005, using funds provided by the Ford Foundation, CORC facilitated exchanges that involved waste pickers from Egypt, Kenya and South Africa visiting each other. In Cairo, Nairobi and Cape Town, participants visited a number of different recycling projects and met a range of organisations including recycling groups, other activist groups and NGOs. They learned about each other’s histories, struggles and the ways in which they each conducted their recycling activities. The main participating organisations included: the youth group ‘Spirit of the Youth’ from Mokattam in Cairo, Pamoja Trust, a youth recyclers’ network from Nairobi and representatives from a mix of new and experienced recycling organisations in Cape Town.

The CORC manager dealing with waste recycling projects notes that the exchanges had many positive effects for the participating organisations. He reports that the South African and Kenyan delegates were particularly inspired to see how waste pickers in Egypt can have a secure income and are valued and respected for the work that they do. According to CORC, the Egyptians felt less isolated and were proud to be considered as being advanced and having useful information to share with other waste pickers. The exchanges helped to open the minds of participants to new ideas and different ways of doing things. At the same time, the exchanges also highlighted that whilst there is much to be gained from sharing experiences and ideas, due to the

²⁵ This case is drawn from CORC (2005) and Bolnick (2006) as well as from an interview with Stefano Marmarato of the Community Organisation Resource Centre. For more information on CORC, please see www.corc.co.za; for more information on Shack/Slum Dwellers International please see www.sdinet.org.

²⁶ See Chapter 6 for more information on the historical development of informal recycling in Cairo as well as current challenges being faced by the *zabbaleen*.

very different social contexts in the three countries the needs of the waste pickers and appropriate responses vary in important ways. For example, whilst the participating South African organisations feel a need to build community and find savings groups a useful way of doing so, this is less relevant to the Egyptian context where the *zabbaleen* have long historical ties and a strong sense of community. The experience of the SDI exchanges shows that although approaches to recycling and organising waste pickers cannot and should not be simply transplanted from one context to another, there is a tremendous amount to be gained from facilitating networking and exchanges between waste pickers (Bolnick 2006; CORC 2005).



(Picture courtesy SDI)

Latin American Waste Picker Network by Lucia Fernandez

The first steps towards creating a Latin American Waste Picker Network (LAWPN) were taken after the Second Latin American Waste Pickers Conference, held in São Leopoldo, Brazil in February 2005. There were four countries involved in the initiative: the Brazilian Waste Picker Movement (MNCR), the Bogotá Waste Picker Association (ARB) from Colombia, some waste picker co-operatives and associations from Argentina (Bajo Flores and Tren Blanco) and members of the Waste Pickers Trade Union (URCUS) from Uruguay.

The first meeting of LAWPN leaders from different countries took place on February 25th, 2005 in Porto Alegre, Brazil at the World Social Forum. Throughout 2005, the LAWPN maintained intense communication by email and provided solidarity to waste picker co-operatives when they faced repression by local governments and engaged in protest action.



First meeting held at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, February 2005

(picture by Lucia Fernandez)

When the Inter-American Development Bank held a conference on ‘Improving the lives of Latin American and Caribbean waste segregators’ in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the LAWPN decided to participate in order to give voice to waste pickers at the event. An important parallel session took place where leaders involved in the LAWPN shared information about the network with new organisations.

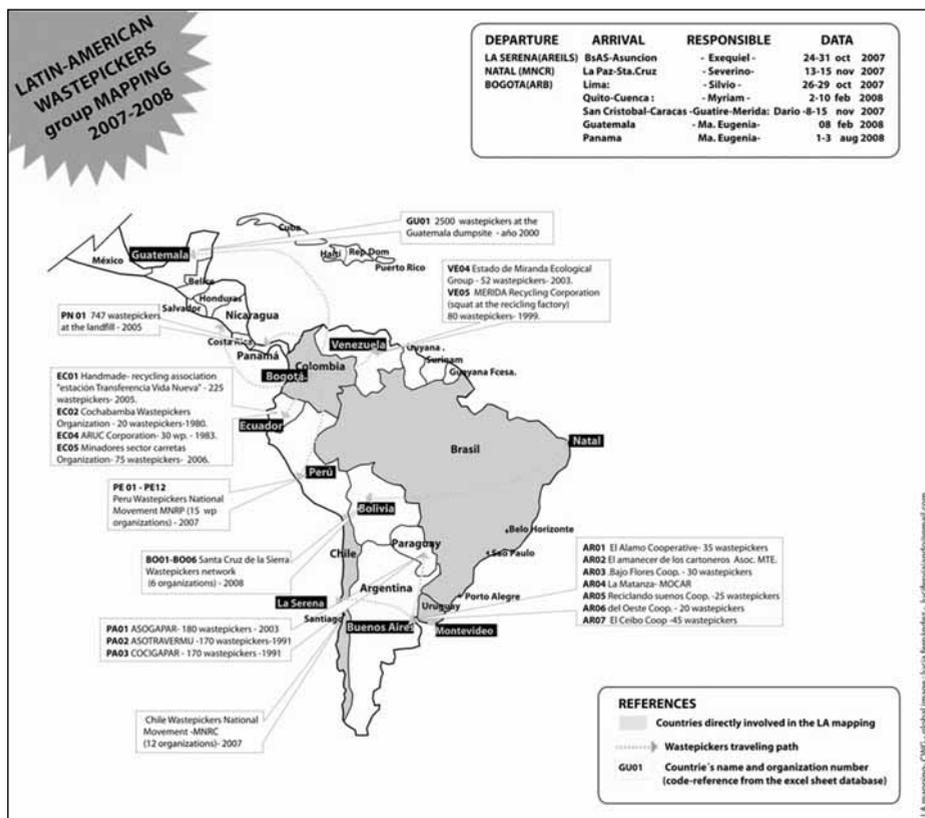
The AVINA Foundation for Sustainable Development in Latin America has provided support to the network since 2006.²⁷ In November of that year, AVINA organised a Conference in Bogotá, Colombia, where the LAWPN had the opportunity to talk about its history and involve waste picker organisations from three new countries: Peru, Paraguay and Ecuador.

The idea of organising a third Latin American Conference became part of the main objectives of the LAWPN. In April 2007, the LAWPN had a meeting in Chile with representatives from Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and the Collaborative Working Group in Solid Waste Management (CWG), two other international networks involved in issues related to waste management and waste picking.

After this meeting, the La Serena Waste Pickers’ Association in Chile was appointed to act as the Secretariat for the network, with technical assistance being provided from Uruguay. With the support of WIEGO, the CWG and AVINA network members

²⁷ For more information on AVINA, please see www.avina.net.

embarked on a mapping exercise to collect information on waste picker organisations in Latin American countries not yet connected to the network.



(graphic by Lucia Fernandez)

In collaboration with WIEGO and AVINA, the LAWPN played a leading role in organising the Third Latin American Waste Pickers Conference/First World Conference of Waste Pickers in Bogotá, Colombia in March 2008. At the conference, five new countries joined the network, bringing membership to 12 organisations from 12 Latin American/Caribbean countries: Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Argentina, Peru, Chile, Colombia and Brazil.

There is a wide variation in the strength of national organisations within the network. For instance, the MNCR is well-established as a national movement in Brazil, while national networks in Ecuador and Bolivia were only created after the conference. In Paraguay and Puerto Rico there still are no national associations.

Structure

The LAWPN Secretariat from Chile worked for the network on a voluntary basis and was expected to co-ordinate activities and communicate information

electronically to members. After the First World/Third Latin American Conference, the Secretariat moved to Brazil and is presently housed by the MNCR, the biggest waste picker movement in Latin America. Four members of the National Commission of the MNCR are in charge of the Latin American Secretariat. The strengthening of the LAWPN Secretariat is one of the objectives of a new five-year Global Project.²⁸

Most of the work of the LAWPN will be carried out via e-mail and through the LAWPN web page that is expected to be operational by mid-2009. The AVINA Foundation still provides the main support to the LAWPN's meetings, projects and other initiatives.

Mission

The LAWPN's mission is:

- To achieve social and political recognition of waste pickers' work as an important occupation/profession, economically, environmentally and socially.
- To change public opinion and that of policy makers in favour of waste pickers, and to advocate for supportive laws, regulations and policies.
- To strengthen waste pickers' organisations.
- To share information amongst waste pickers and with communities.

Santo Spolito, a Colombian waste picker who is a member of the national association in Colombia (the ANR) and was part of the Bogotá conference organising team, expands on the goals of the LAWPN:

We must all be linked to the same support chain, where, if an organisation suffers any setback, it can be somehow supported by the other linked movements, so that everyone is regarded as skilful businessmen instead of the helpless poor.

Accomplishments

To date the main accomplishments of the LAWPN have been related to networking and shared learning. Through their participation in the network, waste picker leaders have improved their internet capacities and enhanced their knowledge of web-based networking strategies. Leaders are all able to connect to each other by internet to co-ordinate actions and meetings, share information and engage in collective planning.

With respect to learning, the network has enabled waste pickers in a growing number of countries to learn from each other's experiences. As Exequiel Estay, the first secretary of the network observes:

Something that is usually overlooked is that the exchange has strengthened the local groups in each country, and we do not give enough importance

²⁸ LAWPN and AVINA are Latin American partners in the Inclusive Cities, Global Project.

to that. Peru and Bolivia have now given formal documents to their Governments. Chile is on a working group with Government. We have all learnt from how Brazil and Colombia have moved forward.

Peru created their National Waste Picker Movement after learning more about the Brazilian and Colombian experiences. In Chile a national movement was created after the involvement of waste pickers' organisations in the network. The Uruguayan waste pickers learnt about co-operatives from Brazil and their union now has seven co-operatives.

Outlining some of the challenges faced by the LAWPN, Exequiel Estay emphasises the importance of communication and leadership:

How to stay informed of the progress of each movement is a challenge. The blog has worked out for Chile. Colombia and Brazil have a webpage. Communication is the first challenge. What fostered the growth of the National Movement in Chile was communication – to work closely with the press, radio, TV, also through their contacts. Another challenge is continued leadership. Those who work without funding, those who equally face joys and failures, those are leaders.

Santo Spolito concurs that the question of leadership is central and highlights the necessity of forging a common vision, arguing that,

[T]he group in general should be strengthened by having a group vision instead of an individual one. As leadership we usually have different points of view. We have to discuss with each other and have to reach agreements.

Making Global Connections by Melanie Samson

There is at present no overarching global network of waste picker organisations, but the First World Conference of Waste Pickers held in Bogotá in March 2008 provided an important opportunity for waste pickers from across the world to meet with each other, share their experiences, and explore how they can continue to work together in the future.

Nohra Padilla of the Colombian National Association of Waste Pickers, who was the chairperson of the World Conference, had this to say about the significance of the event:

The congress was super-important. At the first meeting of the Latin American network we resolved that we need to know about other parts of the world. This congress allowed us to bring together many people to know the conditions of recyclers in many parts of the world, and to discuss the need to sensitise governments about the problems of recyclers and the possibilities and alternatives for social inclusion.

Many waste pickers and allies from support organisations commented on the invaluable experiences of learning about the different ways that waste pickers have organised, the demands that they have developed and the agreements that they have

made with governments to win recognition for their role and be formally integrated into municipal waste management systems. Laxmi Narayan, General Secretary of the KKPKP trade union in India, said that she was particularly inspired by the ways in which waste pickers from Latin America have increased their influence through the Latin American Network.

Although there is no formal, global network, Nohra Padilla noted that, “there is already a global network as we pass information to each other. It is not necessarily necessary to have meetings. But we know what is happening with each other.” At the Conference, plans were developed for continental meetings and a second global conference. In the meantime, waste picker organisations from across the globe have taken solidarity actions to support each others’ struggles and are collaborating on a number of initiatives. Some of the key challenges that waste picker organisations from across the world will have to engage with as they move forward in these processes include finding ways to support the building of waste picker-controlled, democratic organisation in weaker areas; ensuring that there is open and productive debate about differences between organisations; and developing ways of providing each other with meaningful support and solidarity.



First World Conference of Waste Pickers, Bogota

(photo by Leslie Tuttle)