On March 21, 2013, a jubilant cry went out from the crowd as two informal waste pickers withdrew from an automated banking machine the first historic payments for their recycling services. The event took place in Bogotá, Colombia, where the Mayor's Office launched a system to compensate those whose work has, for so long, gone unrecognized.

Traditionally informal waste pickers, known as *recicladores* in Colombia, earned income based on what they could get in private sales for the recyclables they collected. Now, after a two-decade struggle, *recicladores* will also be paid as public service providers. Per ton payments for materials collected and transported will almost match those paid to private operators. The first 790 waste pickers and their families to benefit saw their normal earnings double or even triple. About 4,000 (of Bogotá’s 14,000) waste pickers are registered for the payment programme.

Such a triumph seemed far off in 2011, when the city of Bogotá announced a $1.7 billion (US) public bidding system that would take the role of recycling away from the waste pickers who had been doing it for more than 60 years and hand it instead to private companies. The Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB)—a network of *recicladores’* organizations—and its allies filed a lawsuit to protect workers’ rights. Since 2003, the Constitutional Court of Colombia has issued several judgments that recognize waste pickers as subjects of special protection.

In December 2011, the Constitutional Court struck down the public bidding process, but gave the ARB just three months to present a concrete proposal on how waste pickers should be integrated into the municipal system. WIEGO and other allies worked closely with ARB and the Waste Pickers Trade Union Pact to formulate a technical, operational, economic, political and social proposal that included the entire waste picking community. After months of negotiation, the *recicladores* formally became part of the city’s waste management system.

Now they are recognized and being paid for the valuable services they provide in their community. However, to be sustainable the inclusive model requires adjustment, so ARB and close allies like WIEGO continue negotiating with the current administration. Another challenge will be to ensure that the thousands of other *recicladores* in Bogotá and throughout Colombia are included in a fair payment system.

**WIEGO’s Role in this Story**

WIEGO has partnered for years with waste picker organizations in Colombia, providing direct support to help arm them to challenge government. In 2011, when the issues around privatizing Bogotá’s waste system were growing, WIEGO funded a $50,000 (US) study, conducted by Geosigma under the guidance of ARB and WIEGO, to determine just what value the *recicladores* could realistically place on the collection of a ton of materials.
The evidence-based model produced by Geosigma has been a cornerstone in ongoing negotiations with the city. (While most immediately used in Bogotá, the model has wider applications in Latin America).

WIEGO’s team—and especially both the Global and the Latin American Coordinators for the Waste Picker Programme—have lent considerable expertise and strategic knowledge drawn from around the world to the waste picker organizations in Bogotá over the past several years.

“Becoming organized is a difficult process. In every country in the world, waste pickers have been invisible,” Nohra says. “This situation only changes when we begin to organize.”

In 2006, Nohra received a scholarship and could finally attend university. But as she neared completion of her degree in Public Management, the threat of privatization through the city’s proposed bidding system put her burgeoning skills to the test.

At a global waste pickers’ strategy meeting in April 2012, privatization of waste came to the fore as the biggest threat facing informal recyclers.

“Access to waste is the key aspect—if we lose it, we lose our work,” Nohra told waste pickers from around the world who had gathered in India to chart their survival. “We need to articulate ways in which the municipal solid waste management system and the informal recycling sector can be interrelated.”

She knew this battleground firsthand. As ARB’s leader, it was Nohra who spearheaded the Constitutional Court challenge in Bogotá that saw waste pickers defeat the city’s attempt to privatize waste—and then led another battle to ensure the recolectores were fully included in the Bogotá’s waste management system. Now Nohra is leading negotiations with the city’s public utilities department on a new waste management contract for recyclers.

For her tireless efforts on behalf of her colleagues, and her championing of their environmental service in diverting waste away from landfills and into recycling facilities, Nohra was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Award in San Francisco on April 15, 2013. It’s the world’s largest prize for grassroots environmental activism.

In her acceptance speech, Nohra thanked the Mayor of Bogotá and his advisors for agreeing for the first time ever to pay the informal recyclers—a recognition of them as legitimate workers in the city’s sanitation program. She also thanked the Constitutional Court of Colombia and its judges, “who now understand that the law,” she said, “can change the world.”

Meet other informal workers and learn about their lives: wiego.org/informaleconomy/workerstories