



Women in Informal Employment  
Globalizing and Organizing

# Certification of Occupational Skills:

*A Decisive Step Towards Professionalizing  
Waste Picking as an Occupation and  
Recycling of Solid Waste in Colombia*

Illustrated Report WIEGO COLOMBIA By María Eugenia Duque and Federico Parra



*Photo: Juan Arredondo/Getty Images Reportage*

## Introduction

For more than 80 years, Colombian waste pickers have been recovering potentially recyclable materials that have been discarded and mixed with the garbage in our largest cities. According to the 2010 *National Study of Recycling in Colombia*, the livelihoods of more than 50,000 persons depend directly on this work.<sup>1</sup> The National Association of Waste Pickers (ANR, by its acronym in Spanish) estimates that more than 50,000 families are working in this sector of the informal economy in Colombia.

Thanks to the actions to defend the right to work carried out by waste pickers organized by ANR – under the leadership of their Bogota branch, the Waste Pickers' Association of Bogota (ARB, by its acronym in Spanish) – since 2013 a real transformation in solid waste management has taken place in the country.

<sup>1</sup> Aluna Consultores. 2011. *Estudio Nacional de Reciclaje*, realizado en el marco del Proyecto BID – FOMIN – ARB 2130/MS CO, ATM/ME – 11535 –CO, ATM/GM – 1136 –CO, ATM/ OC – 11537 –CO .

From a scheme based on contracting – and paying – big companies to transport and bury waste, there is a shift towards a model that emphasizes recycling, where waste pickers are recognized and receive remuneration for their work.

This transformation requires national and municipal authorities to develop affirmative actions in favour of waste pickers. Some of the most important ones include capacity building, and equipping and training waste pickers to improve their work practices and processes. The goal is to move towards recognition of waste pickers and their organizations as WASTE MANAGEMENT PUBLIC SERVICE PROVIDERS IN THE COMPONENT OF RECYCLING.

The process to certify occupational skills, offered by the National Training Service (SENA, by its acronym in Spanish), has probably been the most significant step in advancing the professionalization of this occupation.

## Background

The concept of certifying occupational skills was introduced at the beginning of 1998. SENA put it in practice through the National Vocational Training System (SNFT, by its acronym in Spanish). The approach is based on the certification of the “effective capacity to successfully perform a clearly identified work activity.”<sup>2</sup> SENA is one of the bodies responsible for this task.

According to SENA, the certification of occupational skills serves to promote the recognition – social and occupational – of skills acquired outside the realm of school or formal learning. This approach also supports the 2004 International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Recommendation 195 related to the development of human talent. ILO R195 recognizes the learning that takes place in the workplace, both in formal or informal settings, along with work experience. It also calls for the creation of a national framework of qualifications that must include a reliable certification system that will guarantee that the professional aptitudes are recognized by sectors, industries, companies and educational institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Occupational certification is a recognition of having a know-how – a knowledge that is found in different contexts and among different populations, which was not always acquired through formal education. Certification also introduces criteria for improving working conditions, such as workers’ activities related to self-care, health and the environment.

The extension of this programme to waste pickers was the outcome of one of the first advocacy processes advanced by organized waste pickers in Colombia. Gathered around the ANR, waste pickers reacted decisively against acts of

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territory – USAID. 2005. Competencias Laborales, módulo 8 Cultura Empresarial Acueducto, Alcantarillado Aseo.

<sup>3</sup> Process of evaluation and certification of occupational skills. Awareness activity, generalities.

extermination against waste pickers in 1992.<sup>4</sup> After more than seven years of pressure and lobbying by waste pickers, in 1999 the Colombian legislative branch finally adopted Law 511, “which established a National Day for Waste Pickers and for Recycling”. In a very general way, the law served to define the responsibilities of certain government agencies and institutions toward waste pickers. In particular, Article 30 established that “the National Training Service – SENA – will design and introduce an educational and training programme directed to the people engaged in recycling of solid waste throughout the country.”

With the participation of the municipal administration of Bogotá and organized waste pickers, in 2006, SENA began the design and implementation of a number of initiatives to comply with the provisions of Law 511 of 1999. Among the most important of these provisions are: the support to waste pickers’ productive projects, and a programme to assess and certify waste pickers’ occupational skills.

Waste pickers, members of ARB, and who worked in “La Alquería” – a municipal recycling plant – in 2006, were the first to benefit from this process of occupational skills certification. The process was later extended to members of other ARB affiliated organizations, and eventually to organizations not affiliated to ARB. As a second-level organization, occupational skills certification of its members has been part of ARB’s programmes since 2010. To deliver those programmes, ARB works in tandem with SENA.

At the beginning of the process, the “standards of occupational skills” that were applied to waste pickers were those that were traditionally used in the work of those people labouring as public service providers in the area of waste management, as is illustrated in the table below:

<b>Table 1 Standards of Occupational Skills Applied to Waste Pickers</b>	
<b>Standard Code</b>	<b>Name of the Standard</b>
280201019	Treatment of Solid Waste Based on Current Environmental and Technical Parameters
280201124	Using Health and Safety Conditions in the Work Environment
280201122	Managing Information from the Technical Processes Established to Meet Organizational Requirements.
280201015	The Process of Sweeping and Cleaning Roads and Public Areas According to Established Routes in Assigned Zones
280201014	Collection of Solid Waste in Accordance with Standards Established by the Company

*Source: María Eugenia Duque*

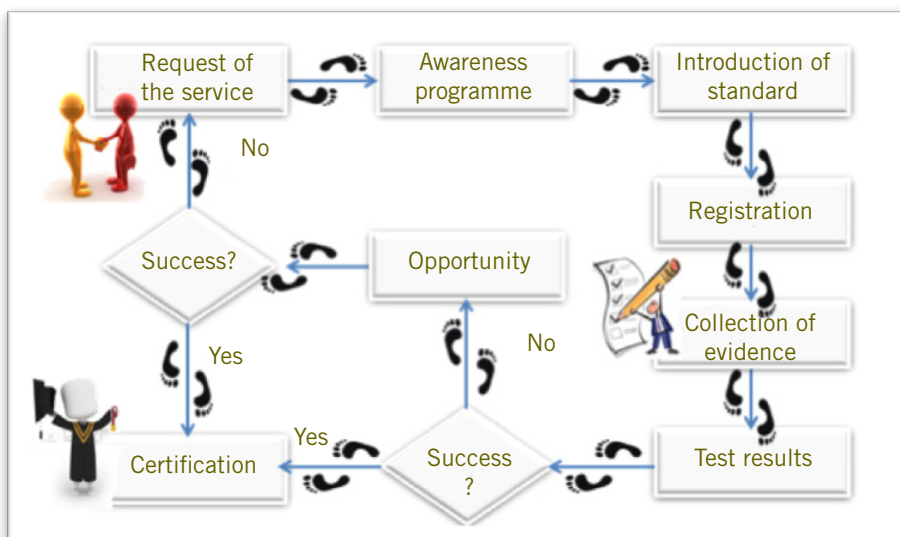
<sup>4</sup> In 1992, 11 waste pickers were murdered at the Universidad Libre de Barranquilla with the intention of using their bodies for research [N. of the E.] <http://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/un-an-quel-guarda-los-rostros-de-la-matanza-en-unilibre-hace-20-anos-58266>.

After applying the standards used for waste management contractors for many years, and after an internal evaluation at SENA, it stated, in tandem with ARB and ARB's technical support team, that waste pickers perform very specific activities. These activities are different from those of workers working with private waste management companies. Therefore, since May 2011, specific standards for waste pickers were developed – with the participation of ARB – with a focus on recycling. This was a fundamental aspect of the professionalization of recycling as an occupation. It introduced a qualitative change: the occupation had its own technical standards, recognized in the framework of the waste management public service in the activity of recycling:

Table 2 Standards of Occupational Skills for Professional Waste Pickers	
Standard Code	Name of the Standard
220201033	Collection of Potentially Recyclable Materials in Accordance with Established Procedures and Current Standards
220201034	Recovery of Potentially Recyclable Materials in Accordance with Established Procedures and Current standards

Source: María Eugenia Duque

## How Does it Work?



Source: [www.sena.edu](http://www.sena.edu) (our translation)

The interested party, in this case, the waste pickers' organization, has to submit a request for SENA's occupational certification services concerning the

specific standards for its sector. Acceptance of the application marks the start of a phase of awareness-raising and introduction to the standard to be used in the certification. The next step is to register the people that will be certified. Necessary verification is carried out to “collect evidence”. SENA’s evaluation staff issues a concept or opinion. After tests have been conducted, SENA conducts an audit of the process to ensure that quality standards and protocols have been followed. When the audit report is done, SENA certifies the group that has been audited. Each waste picker receives his or her certificate.

If for some reason, a person could not demonstrate those specific occupational skills, that person has the opportunity to repeat the process at a later time.

## **Formalization of Waste Pickers as Public Service Providers in Colombia and the Role that the Certification of Occupational Skills Play in that Process**

Between 2003 and 2011 organized waste pickers, under the leadership of ARB, won more than seven pronouncements by the Constitutional Court of Colombia protecting their right to work, and requiring national and municipal authorities to develop affirmative actions in favour of waste pickers. This changed the waste management paradigm in Colombia. Because of that, since 2013, national authorities responsible for the public service of waste management have issued new standards for recycling. According to these standards, recycling has become a fundamental component of waste management services, and waste pickers and their organizations have become authorized providers of recycling services. This has implied the need to engage in “participative planning” of waste management at the municipal level (redevelopment of solid waste management integral plans). It has also meant the need to regulate the transition of waste pickers and their organizations towards their formalization as public service providers of recycling services.

Specifically, National Decree 596, issued in 2016, establishes a “transitory regime for the formalization of professional waste pickers.” The decree defines the requirements, processes and goals by stages that waste pickers and their organizations must follow to obtain full recognition and remuneration as public service providers in the area of recycling services. In particular, in the established process, the sixth of eight phases demands that, as part of the formalization process, members of waste pickers’ organizations must obtain certification of their occupational skills.

## The Role of WIEGO, ANR and Fundación Familia in the Occupational Skills Certification Process

In Colombia, WIEGO has been supporting ANR since 2008. Particularly, since 2013, WIEGO has worked hand by hand with ANR in its efforts to see the Court's orders – regarding recognition, promotion and remuneration of waste pickers and their organizations as recycling service providers – reflected both in national policies and on the ground at the municipal level. Both ANR and WIEGO are partners of the National Alliance for Inclusive Recycling in Colombia. Simultaneously, Fundación Grupo Familia has been providing support to waste pickers' organizations' productive efforts in many cities and municipalities of Colombia.

The convergence of these two processes allowed for the development of an intensive and sustained programme of certification (and recognition) of occupational skills for waste pickers' organizations since 2015. *On WIEGO/ANR's side, this programme has been coordinated and developed by María Eugenia Duque with the help of Margarita Orozco, a facilitator.*

This programme has been part of, and has also influenced, the refinement of the certification of occupational skills process. With SENA's new methodology, waste pickers can obtain certification of occupational skills according to the level of their knowledge of the technical standards – obtaining certification at the advanced, intermediate or basic level, depending on the results of their knowledge tests (as measured through questionnaires), as well as through on-site performance and product tests in actual work environments, such as the Classification and Recycling Stations (ECAS, by its acronym in Spanish).

One of the most important aspects of the certification methodology is that lacking reading skills is not a barrier to certification. In fact, a waste picker's occupational skills can be recognized and acknowledged, regardless of the level of his or her ability to read and/or write.

To support waste pickers who are preparing for a certification test of their knowledge, the WIEGO/ANR technical support team has developed a training and accompaniment module for the certification of occupational skills. The module reinforces the practical and conceptual knowledge of the standards that will be certified. Some of the topics addressed in the module are technical aspects including the types of materials that are handled in recycling, elements of personal protection (EPP, by its acronym in Spanish), concepts of occupational health and safety on the job, and the processes involved in the occupation.

This activity brings together, in a pedagogical manner, the technical concepts with the traditional terms used by waste pickers in their work, hence building their confidence on their knowledge for when they present their tests to be certified.

Between July 2015 and June 2016, more than 400 waste pickers belonging to ARB and allied organizations in Bogotá were certified and/or have updated their occupational skills. At the national level, during the first half of 2016, members of waste picker organizations in the municipalities of Cajica, Zipaquirá, Caloto and Popayán were also certified. During the second half of 2016 we expect to service the members of waste picker organizations in the municipalities of Medellín, Rionegro, La Estrella, Valledupar, Bucaramanga, Pereira and Cartago. The support of SENASCO's Bogotá Regional Industrial Management Centre has been key in this process – the certification work done at the national level is done with the assistance of the team of technical evaluators from Bogotá who travel to the different municipalities.

# Support Process for Occupational Skills in Bogota – Cundinamarca– Popayan and Caloto (First Semester of 2016)

## 1. Awareness-Raising Activities Led by SENA – The Formal Beginning of the Process



*A SENA evaluator conducting an awareness-raising activity. Photos: M. Orozco, 2016*

## 2. Training and Reinforcement of Concepts in Preparation for the Presentation of Knowledge Tests



*A member of WIEGO Colombia's technical support staff facilitating a capacity-building module on occupational skills in different cities. Photos: M. Orozco, 2016*



### 3. Application of Knowledge Tests

The knowledge tests that form part of the process use ICFES type methodology, consisting of a questionnaire and a separate sheet for answers.

#### Presentation of the tests



*Application of questionnaires. Photo: M. Orozco, 2016*

#### Group Supported by a Tutor During the Knowledge Tests

Waste pickers who have problems reading and writing, or illiteracy problems, have the right to ask for a tutor – a critical support because it ensures that the test will be the same for all, regardless of the conditions.



*Photos: M. Orozco, Bogotá, 2016*

#### 4. Application of the Technical Performance and Product Tests

These tests are carried out in actual work environments. Here, we present a selection of photographic evidence of the tests conducted in the city of Popayan by the waste pickers' organizations AREMARPO and RENCAUCA – the test was applied at the ECA from AREMARPO. Other images depict tests in the municipalities of Cajica – Zipaquira and in the city of Bogota.

##### Instructions for the Test



##### Performance Technical Tests



*The evaluator starts the performance and product test. Photos: M. E. Duque, Popayán, 2016*

##### Performance and Product Tests



*Photos: M. Orozco, 2016*

## Performance and Product Test (Processing PET)



Photos: M.E. Duque, Popayan, 2016

## Weighing of Material



## Recording the Weight of Materials



Photos: M. E. Duque, Popayan, 2016

## 5. Distribution of Results of the Knowledge Test and Opportunity for Waste Pickers to Take the Test Again if They Failed Some of the Questions



Waste pickers retaking the tests to proceed to the advanced level. Photos left and middle: AREMARPO, Popayan, 2016. Photo on the right: M. Orozco, Popayan, 2016.