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Waste pickers' cooperatives and social and solidarity economy organizations

INTRODUCTION

Effective waste management is essential to safeguarding public health and sanitation, protecting environment, and improving resource efficiency. Solid waste management is almost always the responsibility of local governments and is often their single largest budget item particularly in developing countries.¹ However, it remains a challenge due to limited financial, physical and human resources. In countries and cities where formal waste management systems are underdeveloped, informal waste pickers have long played a key role in collecting, sorting and recycling waste.

Waste pickers range from people rummaging through garbage in search of food, clothing and other basic, daily needs to informal private collectors of recyclables for sale to middlemen or businesses, as well as organized collectors and sorters of recyclables.² The majority of waste pickers deal with municipal solid waste. In recent years waste pickers have also started to recover electrical and electronic waste (e-waste) as an additional source of recyclable material.³

Due to the informal nature of their work, statistics on waste pickers are still limited.⁴ In 2013, the International Labour Office (ILO) estimated that only one fifth of workers in the waste management and recycling industry are in formal employment. Although little solid data exists, a significant number of workers involved in recycling and waste management are women, often working as waste pickers at the lower end of the informal economy.⁵ Brazil is one of the few countries that systematically reports official statistical data on informal waste pickers. The data from Brazil shows that over a quarter million persons are engaged in waste picking in the country.⁶

Waste pickers make significant contributions to public health, sanitation, and environment at local, national and international levels by promoting resource circulation and reducing the amount of landfill. According to a study by UN Habitat, waste pickers perform majority of ongoing

waste collection in many cities in developing countries at no cost to municipalities.⁷ A study in 2007 found that waste pickers recovered approximately 20 per cent of all waste material in three of six cities studied.⁸ Despite these environmental and social contributions, waste pickers are often not legally recognized as workers. They suffer from poor working conditions and lack social protection. The following are among the major decent work deficits waste pickers face around the world.^{9, 10}

- **Hazardous working environment and lack of occupational safety and health (OSH):** Waste pickers regularly face risks of diseases and injuries by being exposed to toxic materials, contaminated residues, or sharp-edged items. Those operating in open dumps or landfills confront particular risks of injuries or even loss of life, as they can be run over by trucks or become victims of surface subsidence, slides and fires.
- **Low earnings and weak position vis-à-vis middlemen:** Waste pickers, particularly when unorganized, often have a weak bargaining position vis-à-vis middlemen that purchase the recyclables and receive low prices.
- **Exclusion from municipal waste management systems:** Increasingly, waste pickers are being displaced from dumpsites or excluded from bidding and contract processes of waste management due to the adoption of capital-intensive technologies (e.g. waste-to-energy and new disposal systems) and the privatization and outsourcing of waste management to relatively-large private companies as recycling becomes a lucrative business.
- **Social stigma and discrimination:** Waste pickers often belong to socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups (e.g. migrants and refugees, unemployed, women, children, persons with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities). They frequently face stigma, are discriminated against, and are harassed by public and private actors in waste management chains.¹¹

1. World Bank: What a waste: A global review of solid waste management (Washington, DC, 2012). https://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTURBANDEVELOPMENT/Resources/336387-1334852610766/What_a_Waste2012_Final.pdf

2. S. Dias and M. Samson: Informal economy monitoring study sector report: Waste pickers (Cambridge, MA, WIEGO, 2016). <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Dias-Samson-IEMS-Waste-Picker-Sector-Report.pdf>

3. ILO: Tackling informality in e-waste management: The potential of cooperative enterprises (Geneva, 2014). https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/publications/WCMS_315228/lang--en/index.htm

4. ILO: Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture. Second edition (Geneva, 2013). https://www.ilo.org/stat/Publications/WCMS_234413/lang--en/index.htm

5. ILO: Sustainable development, decent work and green jobs, Report V, International Labour Conference, 102nd Session, Geneva, 2013. https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/102/reports/reports-submitted/WCMS_207370/lang--en/index.htm

6. S. Dias: Statistics on waste pickers in Brazil. WIEGO Statistical Brief No. 2 (Cambridge, MA, WIEGO, 2011). http://www.inclusivecities.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Dias_WIEGO_SB2.pdf

7. UN Habitat: Solid waste management in the world's cities: Water and sanitation in world's cities 2010 (London, 2010). <http://mirror.unhabitat.org/pmss/listItemDetails.aspx?publicationID=2918>

8. CWG and GIZ: The economics of the informal sector in solid waste management (Frankfurt, 2011). <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2011-cwg-booklet-economicspects.pdf>

9. WIEGO: Waste pickers: The right to be recognized as workers (Cambridge, MA, 2013). <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/WIEGO-Waste-Pickers-Position-Paper.pdf>

10. ILO and WIEGO: Cooperation among workers in the informal economy: A focus on home-based workers and waste pickers (Geneva, 2017). https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/publications/WCMS_567507/lang--en/index.htm

11. Social cleansing campaign in Colombia in 1990s was a stark example of hostile attitude of the society towards waste pickers.

The role of waste pickers' cooperatives and social and solidarity organizations

In response to these challenges, waste pickers have set up cooperatives and other social and solidarity economy organizations (SSEOs), especially in Latin America and South Asia. In 2013, representatives from waste pickers' organizations participated in the International Labour Conference (ILC) for the first time at its 102nd Session focused on the theme of "Sustainable Development, Green Jobs and Decent Work".

As member-owned, democratically-controlled enterprises, cooperatives are considered among pathways to transition informal economy workers, including waste pickers, to the formal economy through strengthening their collective voice and representation, securing jobs and incomes and facilitating access to basic services and social protection.¹² Cooperatives have played a key role in integrating waste pickers into formal waste management chains, particularly in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, India, and South Africa.

The role of cooperatives and other SSEOs are highlighted in the ILO Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204). The Recommendation urges ILO member States to adopt an integrated national policy framework that addresses "the promotion of entrepreneurship, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, and other forms of business models and economic units, such as cooperatives and other social and solidarity (SSE) units". The points of consensus adopted by the Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the Management of E-waste also acknowledge the role of cooperatives and other SSEOs in promoting rights of workers in the informal e-waste economy and encourage the development and implementation of policies and measures to promote their role.¹³

What is a cooperative?

A cooperative is defined by both the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) as "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise".

What is the social and solidarity economy (SSE)?

The social and solidarity economy is a concept designating enterprises and organizations, in particular cooperatives, mutual benefit societies, associations, foundations and social enterprises, which have the specific feature of producing goods, services and knowledge while pursuing both economic and social aims and fostering solidarity.

Source: The ILO Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193) and ILO Regional Conference on Social Economy, Africa's Response to the Global Crisis, October 2009.

Examples of waste pickers' cooperatives and social and solidarity economy organizations

a) Strengthening collective voice and representation of waste pickers in policy-making processes

By joining or forming cooperatives and other SSEOs, waste pickers can strengthen their collective voice and negotiation power with public authorities and other private actors in waste management chains. They can also participate in waste management policy-making processes that would affect their lives, for instance in the face of dumpsite closures.

In Brazil, waste picking was included as a profession in the Brazilian Occupation Classification (CBO) in 2001 and the role of waste pickers in collecting and recycling materials is clearly mentioned in the Law 12.305 on the National Policy of Solid Waste approved in 2010. In realizing these federal legislations, waste pickers' cooperatives and other SSEOs set up at municipal level in the early 1990s have played a key role. For instance, **Association of Collectors of Paper, Cardboard and Reusable Material (ASMARE)**¹⁴ formed in 1990 in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais State has represented the voice of waste pickers in various policy dialogues on waste management at municipal and state levels. In 1993, the municipal government launched a programme aimed at promoting both public health and creation of income opportunities for waste pickers. ASMARE participated in the consultation process and garnered status as a formal service provider in the municipal recycling scheme. In addition, when the State issued a resolution requiring municipalities to upgrade final disposal sites and forbid waste pickers' access to dumpsites in 2001, ASMARE and the Waste & Citizenship Forum of Minas Gerais State organized a series of multi-stakeholder debates, public hearings and seminars where waste pickers could express their demands around an inclusive state waste management policy. As a result, the state government issued an alternative resolution at the end of 2003 that requires municipalities to create jobs and income alternatives for waste pickers who would be affected by dumpsite closures.¹⁵

Cooperative Association of Recyclers of Bogotá (ARB) is a secondary-level federation of 17 cooperative organizations representing around 1,800 waste pickers in Bogotá, Colombia. ARB was formed in the 1990s by three waste pickers' cooperatives that protested against the closing of three open dumps without consideration for waste pickers who had been making their living from them. ARB resorted repeatedly to the judicial system to defend waste picking as a profession especially by using writs of protection of fundamental rights to the Constitutional Court of Colombia. The Constitutional Court's pronouncements were instrumental in negotiating an inclusive waste management policy and introducing a new remuneration scheme to compensate waste pickers for their services in March 2013. Under this scheme, waste pickers are paid COP 87,000 (US\$30) per ton of recyclables and registered at authorized weighing centres on an individual basis. The policy change benefitted not only the ARB members but also non-member waste pickers who are included in the payment scheme.¹⁶

b) Formalizing the role of waste pickers as public service providers

A core function of waste pickers' cooperatives and SSEOs is to formalize the role of waste pickers as public waste service providers. In India, there are two prominent cases where waste pickers were first organized into trade unions to strengthen their collective voice and then formed their cooperatives to provide front-end waste management services.

Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) is a union established in 1993 in Pune. It first advocated for improved recognition of waste pickers' work including through research on their working conditions and contributions to waste management and environment. In 2005, in collaboration with the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and SNDT Women's University, KKPKP implemented a pilot programme to upskill 1,500 waste pickers for door-to-door waste collection. Based on the successful result, the municipal government authorized waste pickers and itinerant waste buyers to collect recyclables by endorsing their photo-identity cards. To provide these services, KKPKP formed **Solid Waste Collection Handling (SWaCH)**, a cooperative of waste pickers and itinerant waste buyers in 2007. The cooperative entered into a five-year contract with PMC in 2008, which was renewed for 2016-2020. Today, SWaCH has over 3,000 worker-members (all women) – 80 per cent of them are from marginalized castes. They provide door-to-door waste collection service in exchange for user fees paid by each household, sort it

12. ILO: The informal economy and decent work: A policy resource guide (Geneva, 2012). http://www.ilo.org/empolicy/pubs/WCMS_212688/lang-en/index.htm

13. ILO: Points of consensus of the Global Dialogue Forum on Decent Work in the management of electrical and electronic waste (Geneva, 2019). https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/recommendations-conclusions-of-sectoral-meetings/WCMS_685681/lang-en/index.htm

14. ASMARE is legally registered as an association and functions internally as a cooperative.

15. S. Dias: Overview of the legal framework for social inclusion in solid waste management in Brazil. <https://globalrec.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/OVERVIEW-OF-THE-LEGAL-FRAMEWORK-FOR-SOCIAL-INCLUSION-.pdf>

16. O. Abizaid: ARB: Fighting for an inclusive model for recycling in Bogotá (Cambridge, MA, WIEGO, 2015). <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/Abizaid-Bogota-Wastepicker-Recycling-Case-Study.pdf>

and drop off non-recyclables at city-run feeder points. They earn incomes from the user fees and by selling recyclables to local scrap dealers. Each member pays an annual fee to the cooperative and an equal amount for their life insurance coverage. PMC provides members with identity cards that allow them to avail of other benefits, such as interest-free loans and educational support for their children. PMC also provides safety gears, raincoats, footwear, uniforms and collection equipment.¹⁷ The success of SWaCH led to the passage of the national legislation requiring all Indian cities to register waste pickers, provide them with identification cards and include them in decision-making processes of waste management.^{18, 19}

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a trade union founded in 1972 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat representing 1.8 million women working in the informal economy. It is another example of the dual strategy of unionism and cooperativism.²⁰ There are about 50,000 waste pickers in Ahmedabad, more than half of whom are SEWA members. Since the 1990s, SEWA has supported the establishment of several waste pickers' cooperatives including **Karyasiddhi Mahila Cooperative, Saundarya Mahila Cooperative, and Gitanjali Cooperative**. In 2004, SEWA entered into a contract with the Vejalpur municipality to provide door-to-door waste collection service to 45,000 households through SEWA-supported cooperatives.²¹ The municipality made an upfront investment to cover administrative costs and equipment and paid the women workers a monthly salary of Rs. 1,125 (US\$16). The women also received a user fee of Rs. 10 (US\$0.15) per household and earned additional income by selling collected recyclables. SEWA provided training for the women on how to use protective equipment and how to interact with households. As a result, incomes of the women workers had almost quadrupled and their occupational health substantially improved.²²

Micro and small-sized primary cooperatives face difficulties in negotiating with local authorities and competing with larger private actors in the waste value chain. By forming or joining secondary and tertiary-level federations, they can scale up and streamline their operations and improve competitiveness. For instance, **Central Cooperative Solidarity Network of Workers of Recyclable Materials of Minas Gerais (Redesol MG)** in Brazil is a centre of cooperative enterprises that operate in the metropolitan area of Belo Horizonte. It currently has 14 affiliated cooperatives and other SSE enterprises engaged in collecting, sorting and/or processing of recyclables. Some of them have formal contracts with municipalities for the waste service provision. The size of each enterprise varies from 10 to 40 members and the total number of direct workers in Redesol is over 250. Redesol enables joint commercialization of recyclables and technological improvement of collection, sorting, processing and transportation among its affiliates. It also provides the affiliates with training on waste management and democratic governance and management of cooperative enterprises.²³

c) Facilitating access to services and social protection

Some waste pickers' cooperatives directly provide their members with essential services, such as finance, insurance, housing, childcare and education. At the same time, they can also negotiate with governments to extend social protection to waste pickers, particularly when they provide waste management services under formal contracts with the public sector.

Cooperativa Recuperar was created in Medellin, Colombia in 1983 as a response to the closure of an open-air dumpsite to sustain income opportunities for people who had been making their living by collecting recyclables at the dumpsite. The cooperative has signed a formal contract with the local authorities and is legally in charge of waste collection. Currently it has around 1,000 waste picker members, 60 per cent of whom are women. The members are covered by the public medical care system and can access loans, scholarships to continue their studies, and life and accident insurance through the cooperative.²⁴

Movement of Excluded Workers (MTE) is the biggest waste pickers' cooperative in Buenos Aires, Argentina with more than 2,500 members. It established a nursery for 160 children who used to work as waste pickers as part of their fight against child labour with funding from both MTE itself and the local and national governments.²⁵ In June 2017, MTE also opened an educational centre "Anuillan" (meaning determined woman in Mapuche language) where the members who dropped out of school for various reasons could complete their studies. Around 30 students between 18 and 55 years of age come to the school three times a week.²⁶

Similarly in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, **ASMARE** established a child care centre for its members to leave their children and work a full day, with support from the local government and civil society organizations. As a result of the open dialogue between waste pickers and city government administrators, the municipality took over the management and financing of the child care centre and eventually inaugurated it as part of the municipality's educational system of early childhood development centres in 2004.²⁷

At-Tawafouk is a cooperative established in 2010 in Rabat, Morocco to secure livelihoods of waste pickers who would be affected by the local government's decision to close a dump and replace it with a modern waste sorting and landfilling facility. The initiative was initially supported by a private landfill operator, Prizzorno Environment, and an international NGO, Care. The cooperative is now in charge of operating the facility and employs over 150 recycling workers, most of whom used to be waste pickers. Through the cooperative, all members receive a fixed monthly salary of around US\$265, covered by health insurance, and have access to a bank account and a low mortgage.^{28, 29}

d) Providing opportunities for capacity building and skills training

An ILO/WIEGO study (2017) found that almost all the surveyed waste pickers' cooperatives provide and/or facilitate access to technical or legal training for their members. They provide training on accounting and business planning, legal recognition, and technical skills related to waste management, while few provide training on OSH and union training.³⁰

Mooi River Recycling Cooperative in South Africa provides their members and non-member waste pickers with training on waste sorting and hazardous waste handling. The members also receive additional benefits such as extensive education on waste recycling, skills training on processing of various types of waste, training on business administration, computer literacy and management, as well as protective clothing and recycling equipment. Through the cooperative, established in 2009 with the support from an NGO, waste pickers successfully partnered with the local government (Mpofana Municipality) and obtained legal recognition at the Mooi River local landfill.³¹

17. P. Chikarmane: Integrating waste pickers into municipal solid waste management in Pune, India. WIEGO Policy Brief (Urban Policies) No. 8 (Cambridge, MA, WIEGO, 2012). http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Chikarmane_WIEGO_PB8.pdf

18. Urban transformations: In Pune, India, waste pickers go from trash to treasure, World Resources Institute, 2019. <https://www.wri.org/blog/2019/03/urban-transformations-pune-india-waste-pickers-go-trash-treasure>

19. Empowering waste workers for a cleaner, safer city, UN Environment, 2018. <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/empowering-waste-workers-cleaner-safer-city>

20. ILO: Advancing cooperation among women workers in the informal economy: The SEWA way (Geneva, ILO, 2018). https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/publications/WCMS_633752/lang-en/index.htm

21. D. Mahadevia: Solid waste management in Indian cities: Status and emerging practices (Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 2008)

22. L. Oates, A. Sudmant, A. Gouldson and R. Gillard: Reduced waste and improved livelihoods for all: Lessons on waste management from Ahmedabad, India (Coalition for Urban Transitions, London and Washington DC., 2018). https://newclimateeconomy.report/workingpapers/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/09/CUT18_Leeds_Waste_Final-1.pdf

23. Redesol – Building sustainable and solidary links among waste pickers in the informal economy in Brazil, ILO, 2018. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/news/WCMS_632675/lang-en/index.htm

24. M. Medina: Waste picker cooperatives in developing countries. Paper prepared for WIEGO/Cornell/SEWA

Conference on Membership-Based Organizations of the Poor in Ahmedabad, India, January 2005. <http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Medina-wastepickers.pdf>

25. GAIA: On the road to zero waste: Successes and lessons from around the world (Berkeley, 2012). <http://www.no-burn.org/wp-content/uploads/On-the-Road-to-Zero-Waste.pdf>

26. Con 30 alumnos, abrió el primer bachillerato cartonero del país, LA PRENSA, 2017. <http://www.laprensa.com.ar/455200-Con-30-alumnos-abrio-el-primer-bachillerato-cartonero-del-pais.note.aspx>

27. ILO: Cooperatives meeting informal economy workers' child care needs (Geneva, 2018). https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/publications/WCMS_626682/lang-en/index.htm

28. GIZ, SWEEP-Net and D-Waste: Report on the solid waste management in Morocco (Tunis, GIZ, 2014). https://www.retech-germany.net/fileadmin/retech/05_mediathek/laenderinformationen/Marokko_RA_ANG_WEB_Laenderprofile_sweep_net.pdf

29. F. Arib: Des solutions sociales et innovantes pour une gestion durable des déchets au Maroc - Cas de l'inclusion du secteur informel. Paper presented at the UNTFSS International Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, June 2019. http://unsse.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/299_Arib_Des-solutions-sociales-et-innovante_Fr.pdf

30. ILO and WIEGO, op. cit., p. 36.

31. SEED and Adelphi Research: Mooi River waste reclaiming: Boosting recycling and empowering informal waste pickers in Mooi River (Berlin, SEED, 2015). https://www.seed.uno/images/casestudies/SEED_Case_Study_MooiRiver_SothAfrica.pdf

Planeta Verde is a waste pickers' cooperative established in 2000 in Rionegro, Colombia to generate employment opportunities for vulnerable populations and mitigate environmental impacts caused by poor waste management. The cooperative that has 86 members put emphasis on literacy education and training of waste pickers to be able to influence public waste management policy. Currently, 98 per cent of the members can read and write, 70 per cent have primary education and 24 per cent have completed secondary education. Members receive continuous training on a range of topics including gender equality, OSH, personal finance, business skills and cooperative management.³²

The secondary-level cooperative federation **Redesol MG** in Brazil has implemented various projects on workers' education and well-being for its affiliated members. The most recent projects include: literacy courses in partnership with Banco do Brazil Foundation; health risks mapping in partnership with the WIEGO; implementation of Catafácil, a management software for waste picker businesses developed through partnership of various waste picker organizations and local universities.

a) Raising public awareness on the role of waste pickers

Self and social recognition of waste pickers as recycling workers is a pre-requisite toward building collective voice and self-representation and engaging in negotiations with employers, suppliers, buyers and middlemen. Waste pickers' cooperatives and SSEOs conduct research and campaigns to raise public awareness on their role in collaboration with researchers, civil society organizations and other support institutions.

ASMARE has collaborated with a local university museum of knowledge and science in organizing an exhibition on the history of struggles for social recognition and environmental contributions of waste pickers' cooperatives in Belo Horizonte. Through these activities, waste pickers' cooperatives have been officially contracted to manage waste during special events such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

A testimony of Suman More, a member of KKPCK and SWaCH Cooperative in Pune, India

Earlier when people passed us on the streets they would cover their noses, they would not talk to us or even stand next to us. After the cooperative was established there has been a big change in peoples' attitudes. We are treated with more respect. Even when the clients are not in the house they tell us to go in and get the waste from their baskets. Before they would call us thieves, so there has been a big change in their attitudes towards us. Also now our news appear in newspapers and other media. Often residents show them to us, saying "you are in the news!"

Source: The ILO interview with Susan More³³

Key challenges for waste pickers' cooperatives and social and solidarity economy organizations

Although much progress has been made to improve living and working conditions of waste pickers through cooperatives and other SSEOs, various challenges remain in integrating waste pickers in formal waste management systems and promoting decent work for waste pickers.

a) Economic and market-related challenges

An ILO/WIEGO study (2017) found that many waste pickers' cooperatives have difficulties in accumulating and achieving economies of scale to acquire their own venues, pay their bills or reduce members'

insecurity and precariousness. These difficulties are often correlated with their weak bargaining power and limited economic and financial capacities. In addition, they are also negatively affected by the adoption of capital-intensive technologies such as waste-to-energy plants and the privatization of waste management. Even when waste management is open for bidding, micro and small-sized cooperatives are not able to compete with larger and more established waste companies in the absence of government support.³⁴

To address these challenges, it is essential for primary waste pickers' cooperatives to join or form cooperative federations that can support primary-level cooperatives in improving operations, accessing services and skills training and increasing bargaining power, in partnership with trade unions and other support institutions. The cases of KKPCK-supported SWaCH and SEWA-supported cooperatives in India are good examples of alliance building between trade unions and cooperatives. The cooperation between these two institutional forms needs to be encouraged to help improve the livelihoods of waste pickers.

b) Policy-related challenges

A major challenge at the policy level is the lack of enforcement of laws and agreements that the waste pickers' cooperatives negotiated with governments. For instance, in Colombia, in spite of the Constitutional Court's judgements which recognized the rights of waste picker organizations to provide waste collection services and to be included in public tendering processes, the local governments' policies, plans and programmes continued to exclude them. In the tendering processes for the management of a landfill in 2010, it became evident that the local government authorities remained biased in favour of big waste collection corporations.³⁵

Other challenges are attributed to limited government support and absence of legal identity and recognition for waste pickers and their organizations. In Turkey, according to the recently passed-law, the status of waste pickers is not formally recognized and purchases from informal waste pickers is punishable with a fine. Very few governments provide favourable procurement conditions to cooperatives in waste management systems for their social development function for their members and communities. In the ILO/WIEGO study (2017), only three cooperatives reporting receiving tax exemptions were based in Brazil. Even these cooperatives are challenged by curtailment of selective collection in the municipalities and taxation of the sale of recyclable materials.³⁶

In Brazil, integration of waste pickers' cooperatives in the early 1990s resulted from the willingness of the municipalities (São Paulo, Porto Alegre, and Belo Horizonte) run by the Workers' Party to incorporate waste pickers' demands.³⁷ The achievement of waste pickers' cooperatives and SSEOs in the country has owed in large part to such political commitment. In this regard, generation of reliable data and knowledge on waste pickers and the regulatory environment around their organizations including cooperatives is particularly important in informing policy change.

c) Internal challenges

Challenges can also be linked to cooperatives' internal capacities. Particularly, small-sized primary waste pickers' cooperatives face challenges in terms of management and governance including: lack of a coherent vision and strategic planning; blurred division of labour; and non-existence of regular meetings and written records. Furthermore, high turnover and limited ownership amongst members are among internal difficulties. If the work with cooperatives is precarious and low-paid without any formal arrangements, members tend to leave when they get better jobs or other opportunities towards formal employment.³⁸

32. Cooperative of Associated Work Planeta Verde: Improving living conditions of waste pickers in Colombia, ILO, 2018. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/news/WCMS_643714/lang-en/index.htm

33. Interview with Suman More, Solid Waste Collection and Handling (SWaCH), ILO, 2014. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/news/WCMS_534438/lang-en/index.htm

34. ILO and WIEGO, op. cit., p. 56.

35. O. Abizaid, op. cit., p. 5.

36. ILO and WIEGO, op. cit., p. 26.

37. S. Dias and A. Ogando: Rethinking gender and waste: Exploratory finding from participatory action research in Brazil. Work organization, Labour & Globalisation Vol. 9, No. 2 (Winter 2015), pp. 51-63. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorglablog.9.2.0051>

38. ILO and WIEGO, op. cit., p. 49.

Although the majority of waste pickers' cooperatives integrated women, gender inequalities still exist within these cooperatives. In general, as enterprises based on values and principles encouraging democracy, equality, education, open membership and concern for community, cooperatives can be vehicles promoting gender equality. They could do so through improving women's working conditions, promoting their advancement to management and leadership positions, and implementing awareness raising activities on gender-related issues.³⁹

These functions may not always be obvious, as reflected in Dias and Ogando's study (2015) on gender dynamics in the waste picker movement in Brazil. The study highlights the sexual division of labour within waste pickers' cooperatives where men work in physically demanding activities such as collection and transport and women are involved in activities such as sorting which require more dexterity but are less valued. The study also revealed that women members often had less decision-making power within waste pickers' cooperatives than male members.⁴⁰

Many waste pickers' cooperatives provide capacity building and training to their members to address these internal challenges with the support of governments, trade unions, development agencies, and other civil society organizations. It is important to ensure decent working conditions for waste picker members through building their capacities so that they stay and become committed to their cooperatives.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive waste management policies that integrate waste pickers into formal recycling chains can contribute not only to the promotion of recycling and resource circulation, but also to the creation of decent work, poverty reduction, and social inclusion.

Waste pickers' cooperatives and other SSEOs have played key roles in integrating and formalizing the work of waste pickers in the recycling value chain. Their main roles include: a) Strengthening collective voice and representing waste pickers in policy-making processes; b) Providing and formalizing waste management service; c) Facilitating access to basic services and social protection schemes; d) Providing training and capacity building opportunities; and e) Raising public awareness on the role of waste pickers.

At the same time, waste pickers' cooperatives and other SSEOs face various internal and external challenges. Among the external challenges are: a) Increasing competition with large companies in the privatization of waste management; b) Development and adoption of the capital-intensive waste management technologies; and c) Lack of recognition of

waste picking as an occupation and absence of an enabling environment for waste pickers' organizations. The internal challenges include: a) Lack of scalability; and b) Insufficient capacity building particularly on management, governance and political advocacy.

In order to address these challenges and to advance decent work for waste pickers through their organizations, the following recommendations emerge:

- Governments at national and local levels can formally recognize waste picking as an occupation and provide legal identity to waste pickers and their organizations. They can encourage the participation of these organizations in policy-making processes that would improve waste pickers' lives. In addition, governments can enable waste pickers' cooperatives and SSEOs to participate in tendering and contract processes, for instance by making the procedure clear and straightforward, ensuring the same terms and conditions with other private companies, and giving priorities to waste pickers' organizations when they contribute to specific development objectives (e.g. women empowerment, poverty reduction, or social inclusion). The ILO's Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 (No. 193) provides guidance on creating a supportive policy and legal framework consistent with the nature and function of cooperatives.
- Trade unions can organize waste pickers in the informal economy and encourage their participation in social dialogue and policy-making processes on waste management. They can also help waste pickers form cooperatives and other SSEOs that provide front-end waste management services.
- Other support institutions (e.g. development agencies, research institutions and civil society organizations) can help waste pickers' cooperatives and SSEOs engage in policy-making processes and multi-stakeholder debates on waste management, particularly through data collection and knowledge generation on the role of waste pickers and the inclusive waste management model. They can also support capacity building of members including on OSH, gender equality, policy advocacy and cooperative governance and management.
- Cooperatives and other SSEOs can register as legal entities to be recognized as formal waste service providers. Micro and small-sized primary cooperatives can join or form secondary and/or tertiary-level cooperative federations in order to strengthen collective voice and bargaining power, improve efficiency of operations, diversify services and sources of financing, and expand collaboration with other stakeholders.

39. ILO and ICA: Advancing gender equality: The cooperative way (Geneva, 2015). https://www.ilo.org/empent/units/cooperatives/WCMS_379095/lang--en/index.htm

40. S. Dias and A. Ogando, op. cit.

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