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The Emergence of Trash Picker Cooperatives
and the Challenges to Social Inclusion

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Introduction

Street scavenging, or informal trash picking, has become an increasingly conspicuous activity in low and middle-income countries. Rural poverty and unemployment — resulting to a large extent from the mechanization of agriculture — contributes to the strong movement of peasants toward cities (Andersson, 2005). This creation and migration of poverty places tremendous pressure on urban centers for generating jobs and providing basic services and infrastructure to accommodate fast-growing populations. Trash picking thus emerges as a strategy for survival where jobs for unskilled labor are scarce and “waste” is amply available (Medina, 2007). Brazil is a particularly emblematic case in this regard both in terms of its high rates of urbanization — 83% (Population Reference Bureau, 2008) — and of its large population of trash pickers — estimated at 400 thousand by Forum Lixo e Cidadania, a national NGO that provides support to trash pickers (Silva, 2007).

Improvements in technologies to reprocess recyclable materials, combined with dramatic increases in waste outputs have contributed to transforming recycling into an economical and environmentally appealing alternative to extracting raw materials. This has led to the emergence of “waste” as a valuable commodity, much in contrast with its earlier status as an environmental externality and hazardous inconvenience. Recovery rates for aluminum in Brazil, for example, are among the highest in the world, exceeding even those of developed countries (ABAL, 2008). But this environmentally salutary fact, if contemplated through a broader socio-political and economic prism, reveals a not-so-commendable reality. To a large extent these rates are high because aluminum cans, being amongst the more valuable recyclables, are intensely sought after by street scavengers. Because of the low social status and economic fragility of this group of people, the activity of informal trash picking raises concern, as it exacerbates historical patterns of inequality.

In recognition of the challenges posed by this phenomenon to the development of urban societies and economies, some Brazilian municipalities and the federal authorities have enacted legislation aiming to integrate solid waste management practices with other spheres of urban planning. Some of these legislations’ effects are the official recognition of trash picking as a profession and the financial support for the formalization of the activity through the
formation of cooperatives. The Integrated Solid Waste Management Program of the city of Porto Alegre, for instance, is one of the earliest examples of such types of policies. Its 18-year experience provides a solid reference point for assessing the challenges facing Brasilia, which plans to implement an integrated solid waste management of its own. The present work compares municipal waste management practices in these two cities in examination of the professed potential of cooperatives to serve as mechanisms for social inclusion of trash pickers. It describes major advances and still present challenges the two cities face in efforts to establish a socially inclusive, integrated model of solid waste management.

Methods

I chose Brasilia and Porto Alegre because they share fundamental cultural and economic traits that render them comparable despite their differences in terms of regional history. They are also faced with urban paradigms and challenges typical of large metropolitan areas of the developing world. At the same time, they represent two distinct stages of development in urban solid waste management. I conducted my fieldwork from early June to mid-August 2008, with the first phase taking place in Porto Alegre from June 6 through 30. The remaining period was spent studying the solid waste management situation in Brasilia. Through semi-structured interviews and participant observation, I collected data of the cooperative worker’s quality of life and work in Porto Alegre. In Brasilia, data collection was accomplished through interviews and participant observation in meetings with various stakeholders.

During my stay in the capital I spoke with various people associated with an organization, CENTTCOOP, and was invited on numerous occasions to attend and observe meetings among cooperative leaders and between the organization, government institutions, and the University of Brasilia. CENT- COOP represents and gives administrative and legal support to all the cooperatives in Brasilia, was created in Brasilia in 2006. These meetings provided me with a solid understanding of the intricate lines of interest operating in the field of recycling as well as the interactions amongst the various actors of this network. This allowed me to see the internal and external difficulties most cooperatives in Brasilia face for creating cohesion amongst themselves and legitimizing their activities vis à vis society and the government.

Field Observations

Porto Alegre

With the creation of an integrated solid waste management program in 1990, the working conditions of many trash pickers in Porto Alegre have improved. Groups that worked out in the open on illegally settled land prior to the program now have a roof to work under and adequate infrastructure to perform their duties. The organizational and technical support provided by government and NGOs has also allowed for some degree of professional empowerment. The formation of cooperatives creates mechanisms of democratic participation that support personal and political improvement. It should be noted, however, that there have not been studies documenting the changes in income that have taken place after the creation of cooperatives.

Despite these positive results, three key factors take away some of the merit of the program. Firstly, the high dependence of the cooperatives on the municipal cleaning agency limits the program’s success. The majority of the waste the trash pickers separate is provided by the cleaning agency while a small portion is donated directly by private businesses or government agencies. This generates patterns of dependency that places the cooperatives that are not on good terms with the cleaning agency at a disadvantage (Fortes, 2006). Secondly, the high dependence and limited bargaining power of the cooperatives relative to the buyers/middlemen is concerning. It is rather surprising that direct sales to industry have not evolved into common practice, since both the cooperatives and industry stand to gain by eliminating the middleman. Because cooperatives have neither logistical nor organizational means to scale up production, they continue to sell to the middlemen, whom control prices and make the lion’s share of the profits. Thirdly, the low level of interaction among the cooperatives weakens them politically and prevents the constructive exchange of experiences and ideas. The fragmentation of groups of people that share the same social political and economic plight leaves them at a great disadvantage in terms of negotiating their claims and objectives.

Brasilia

Porto Alegre’s model — with almost two decades of an integrated solid waste management system — highlights some of the obstacles facing
Brasília’s integrated waste management program. The same disjointedness seen among the trash pickers in Porto Alegre also affects the different parties of trash pickers in Brasília. In terms of infrastructure and equipment, however, Brasília still lags far behind. The majority of the cooperatives do not conduct formal book keeping, and only half operate in built environments — the other half work under the elements on illegally settled land. The majority is engaged in patron–client relationships with the only buyer of recyclables, many of them being financially indebted to this company. Indebtedness also takes the form of “favors”, as is the case in which the buyer “lends” them company trucks. There is federal money earmarked for the construction of triage units and purchasing of equipment, but it awaits disbursement because most cooperatives do not have a place where they can legally build. And while all of the cooperatives have received a compactor to press their materials, those cooperatives without a land title or use concession cannot access the electrical grid and thus are unable to use the equipment.

Despite these challenges, there is significant potential for a more successful integrated solid waste management system in Brasília. As mentioned above, CENTCOOP is an umbrella organization for cooperatives, providing them with local political representation, logistical, administrative, and legal support, and negotiated prices of materials. In addition, CENTCOOP is trying to establish a central warehouse from which to sell production by all affiliated co–ops. This centralization has the potential for direct negotiation with industries without a middleman. Ideologically CENTCOOP is well grounded on principles of democratic participation, and embraces goals of economic and administrative self–sufficiency, capacity building, and political independence. Whether or not its mission statement will crystallize in the real world will depend to a large extent on the continued action of a network of organizations (Bank of Brazil Foundation, Caritas, NGOs, University of Brasilia) in terms of providing capacity building, technical and legal advising, and some financial support during the period of establishment of the cooperatives. Without the prospect of achieving self–sufficiency, the potential of the cooperative system to empower trash pickers will be undermined. Also important is the leadership role that the president of CENTCOOP embodies. His or her charisma and diplomatic skill is essential for fostering cohesion and trust amongst the groups of cooperatives.

**Conclusion**

Despite the overall improvements in waste management in Porto Alegre, the effects of the city’s integrated model on the lives of trash pickers working in cooperatives fall short of the professed goals. The occupation is still highly marginalized, incomes vary amongst the different cooperatives, with the majority falling below Brazil’s minimum wage (which is less than 200 US dollars per month), there is high worker turnover, provision of education and capacity building is minimal, job security or health care benefits are nonexistent, no cooperative is a self–sustaining enterprise, and favoritism on the part of the government agency generates competition and causes fragmentation amongst the cooperatives.

These facts demonstrate that well–meaning policies in and of themselves are not enough to change social behavior and political practices; a structure of checks and balances needs to be in place to guarantee transparency, accountability, and the equitable distribution of political leverage and economic bargaining power. Furthermore, notwithstanding the various degrees and definitions of social inclusion (ranging from the basic economic inclusion in the form of a job to equal access to public services to the acceptance of minority groups by...
mainstream society and the state), the stigma associated with the work of trash picking propagates patterns of exclusion.

I contend that in this particular occupation, where the material waste from society converges with the economically obsolete, the displaced and dispossessed people of Brazilian society, true social inclusion is not possible without public participation in the form of separation of household garbage from solid recyclables (which would signal acknowledgement of the trash pickers work). Effective separation at the household level would greatly increase recovery rates due to lowered contamination of solid waste by ‘wet’ organic matter and facilitate the work of trash pickers at the triage units. The very notion of development and social change by way of top–down “social technologies” is critiqued here. This critique is particularly meaningful in the context of Brasilia, the quintessential Brazilian example of a Utopia that hoped to promote social change through formulas of spatial configuration1. Furthermore, questions are raised regarding the wisdom of the waste management policies of both cities (and of federal policies themselves) in pushing for the eradication of informal street scavenging while offering alternatives that have not been proven to be effective from the socio-economic standpoint.

A constructive tactic to take is to raise awareness about the valuable social, environmental, and economic contributions of the trash pickers. They are agents of their own inclusion by pursuing an honest form of income, perhaps one of a few available to them. The trash pickers are environmental agents, for reasons already explained elsewhere; they are an essential part of an economic production chain. Through their low pay they subsidize commercial operations and supply a service that in certain countries is seen as a duty of the government, and which thus far in many cities in Brazil has been provided virtually free of charge to the state. Implementing a solid waste management system faces the challenges of overcoming entrenched social attitudes and historical practices of waste management to enable a viable system that is both healthful and beneficial to the environment and the trash pickers.

commercialization of recyclables, that is, all recyclable materials in the Federal District are sold (directly or through middlemen) to this company, which then sells directly to industry.

[3] Brasilia’s urban plan and architecture reflect high modernist principles of spatial order and configuration by which class distinctions are minimized. For example, residential buildings look the same from the outside, regardless of the professional rank of occupants.

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References


Notes

[1] Central de Cooperativas de Materiais Recicláveis do Distrito Federal
[2] This company holds a monopoly on the

30 Volume 28, Spring 2009