



## Cultivating Climate Justice

This four-part article series “Cultivating Climate Justice” tells the stories of community groups on the frontlines of the pollution, waste and climate crises, working together for systems change. United across six continents, these grassroots groups are defending community rights to clean air, clean water, zero waste, environmental justice, and good jobs. They are all members of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives.

GAIA is a worldwide alliance of more than 800 grassroots groups, non-governmental organizations, and individuals in over 90 countries whose ultimate vision is a just, toxic-free world without incineration.

GAIA's greatest strength lies in its membership, which includes some of the most active leaders in environmental health and justice struggles internationally. Worldwide, we are demonstrating how to stop incinerators, address climate change and environmental injustice, and implement zero waste alternatives. GAIA's members work through a combination of grassroots organizing, strategic alliances, and creative approaches to local economic development.



This series is produced in collaboration with [Other Worlds](#). Other Worlds inspires hope and knowledge that another world is possible, and helps build it by shedding light on political, economic, social, and environmental alternatives that are flourishing throughout the world.

The series can be viewed online on GAIA's blog, [www.zerowasteworld.org](http://www.zerowasteworld.org)

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## Cultivating Climate Justice from the Frontlines of the Crisis

*“To anyone who continues to deny the reality that is climate change.... I dare you to go to the islands of the Pacific, the islands of the Caribbean and the islands of the Indian Ocean and see the impacts of rising sea levels; to the mountainous regions of the Himalayas and the Andes to see communities confronting glacial floods, to the Arctic where communities grapple with the fast dwindling polar ice caps, to the large deltas of the Mekong, the Ganges, the Amazon, and the Nile where lives and livelihoods are drowned... And if that is not enough, you may want to pay a visit to the Philippines right now.” – Philippines lead negotiator Yeb Sano addressing the opening session of the UN climate summit in Warsaw, following Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013*

It's been a year since Super Typhoon Yolanda (often called Typhoon Haiyan in other countries) swept through the Philippines, **killing more than 6,000 people** and destroying the homes of many more. As UN negotiator for the Philippines Yeb Sano explained in his address to the United Nations: for many people, this is what climate change looks like.

Following the typhoon, survivors in impacted communities in the Philippines came together in a deep expression of solidarity to help each other rebuild their homes and lives. Using only reclaimed materials—remains of their homes and other disaster debris—residents of the municipalities of Bantayan and Madridejos worked together to reconstruct their neighborhoods, one house at a time. Salvacion Fulmenar, a resident of Bantayan Island, explained that fifty of her neighbors built her house with her.



The residents also worked together to increase resiliency against future disasters, particularly around the issue of waste management. Shalimar Vitan, Asia-Pacific Coordinator for the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) explained the connection. “Yolanda made us realize how much waste, more than anything else, is relevant to disasters, because the aftermath of a disaster is garbage and waste, equivalent to a year’s supply. A sustainable treatment of waste builds our preparedness for disasters and it builds the resiliency of communities.” Residents worked with local and international non-profit organizations to conduct waste audits and seminars in the impacted communities.



A sustainable treatment of waste does more than build preparedness for disasters—it **also helps to combat climate change**. Waste disposal through dumping or burning is a major contributor to climate change. On the flip side, waste reduction and recycling significantly decrease greenhouse gas emissions. **Given that climate**

**change is causing increasing extreme weather**, better waste management actually helps to prevent events like Super Typhoon Yolanda.

But reducing waste in the Philippines is not enough to stop climate change or to protect vulnerable communities living there. What’s needed is for the issues of waste and climate crises to be solved collaboratively across borders. And in an inspiring Asia Pacific grassroots partnership, that is exactly what’s happening.

## Solidarity for clean air, good jobs, and justice

One of the greatest injustices of climate change is that those who have done the least to cause it—like the residents of the Philippines hit by Super Typhoon Yolanda—feel the impacts first and worst through rising sea levels and extreme weather. Meanwhile, areas that are responsible for the largest greenhouse gas emissions often feel little pressure to reduce their emissions. They tend to be wealthier with more powerful governments, thus they are less susceptible to international pressure and often have infrastructure that is better able to withstand extreme weather. For example, while Super Typhoon Yolanda was ripping through the Philippines, just across the sea, Prime Minister Abott of Australia continued to deny the existence of climate change.



Yet underneath the political divides of the Asia Pacific region, at the level of the citizenry, strong international bonds have formed. Grassroots communities of the Philippines and Australia have been supporting each other in a common fight against incineration.

In addition to being a major contributor to climate change, incineration [releases cancer-causing toxins, kills jobs, and violates the principles of environmental justice](#). The Philippines stands out as the only country to have [banned incineration](#), setting this important precedent 15 years ago. However, this ban is currently under attack by companies, elected officials, and government agencies. Meanwhile, Western Australia is facing an unprecedented onslaught of incinerator proposals from polluting corporations trying to pass the dirty practice of waste burning as “green.”

People from both countries have been meeting to share information about incinerators, reports, and strategies. Just after Super Typhoon Yolanda struck, Australian toxics expert [Lee Bell](#) traveled to the Philippines to visit with communities threatened with incinerators. Lee spoke to members of Congress, the media, and the general public. He also conducted small meetings and workshops to update the local network on trends in the incineration industry, and shared a community handbook on questions to ask your government about an incinerator proposal. Shortly after, residents of the Philippines mobilized support and gathered signatures for an Australian petition against the export of hazardous waste.

These are just a couple examples of what is a rich and ongoing partnership. Jane Bremmer, a resident of Western Australia who works with the [Alliance for a Clean Environment](#) and the [National Toxics Network](#) explained, “The connection between the Philippines and Australia is really important. Our massive contribution to air pollution and climate change directly affects the Philippines and contributes to natural disasters. Collaborating with them has also strengthened our own work fighting incinerators, teaching us how to work more effectively and communicate across different cultures.”

Froilan Grate, president of the [Mother Earth Foundation](#) in the Philippines, explained, “The number one argument for incineration in the Philippines is that it’s being done successfully in First World countries, and that it’s modern and high tech. So we need a lot of foreign groups giving their voice and opposition to shatter this lie.”

The governments of the world are not working effectively together on the connections between climate change and waste, issues that affect us all. They may spend years passing the buck, avoiding blame and responsibility for rising sea levels and extreme weather. But as the cross-border collaboration between Australia and the Philippines demonstrates, what governments are failing to do, people are already doing. Across political differences, geographic divides, and cultural differences, global citizens are joining together in a unified fight that is cultivating a new world of climate justice.

## Cultivating Climate Justice:

### Brazilian Workers Leading the Charge Toward Zero Waste

The streets of Belo Horizonte were filled with singing, dancing, chanting, and marching. It was not a holiday or an election day or a soccer game. The chant was: “We don’t want incineration! Recycle! Recycle!”

It was September 19, 2014, and this was the launch of a national [Zero Waste Alliance](#), Brazil style. Exuberant, celebratory, and led by recycling workers.

The recycling workers of Brazil have long been a powerful force in protecting their communities and the climate. Now they are on the forefront of a nation-wide movement for zero waste.



#### **Zero Waste: A Just Alternative to Pollution**

To those hearing about it for the first time, “[zero waste](#)” may sound unrealistic. But in fact, zero waste alliances are forming all over the world [and making great strides toward building a new kind of economy that is good for people and the planet](#). Zero waste encompasses the full lifecycle of our stuff, starting with reduced extraction and responsible product design, and ending with all materials being reused, recycled, or composted.

The current practice of burning or dumping waste is a major contributor to climate change. Pound for pound, [burning waste is even worse for the climate than the dirty practice of burning coal](#). It also releases cancer-causing toxins and other air pollutants. The potential benefits of zero waste for the climate and clean air are enormous.

But at its best, zero waste is about much more than reducing pollution and greenhouse gases.

Whereas incineration and waste dumping [frequently violate the principles of environmental justice](#), zero waste has great potential to improve the lives of people that feel the greatest impacts of our “dig, burn, dump” economy.

This is particularly true when zero waste systems are designed with worker rights at the center, as in the case of Brazil, where recycling workers are at the forefront of the zero waste alliance. And in Brazil, where the workers collaborate closely with local non-governmental organizations like [Instituto Polis](#), the labor-environmentalist alliance is fundamental.

So how did the workers of Brazil get involved in a zero waste alliance? They started by getting organized.

#### **A National Movement of Recycling Workers**

Recyclers do the work of collecting and separating out recyclable materials from the waste stream. It’s often a dangerous and low-paying job. But in Brazil—and other Latin American countries, including [Chile](#) and [Colombia](#)—recycling workers have made great strides toward good pay and safe working conditions.

Since its formation in 1999, the Brazil-based [National Movement of Recycling Workers](#) (MNCR) has achieved major victories for the sector. Earlier this year, one of the leading members of the MNCR, Maria Monica da Silva, won a [Living Legacy award for her work](#) "...creating significant improvements in the situation and recognition of the... recyclers in...Sao Paulo, Brazil. The vast majority of these recyclers are women, and together they make an enormous environmental contribution, but the value of their work is too often unrecognized."

What's particularly inspiring about the recycling workers' union in Brazil is that their ambitions for justice go far beyond their own working conditions. The recyclers understand their work as being on forefront of solving the climate, waste, and air pollution crises that impact their families, communities, and the entire world. The first line of the mission statement of the MNCR is to "contribute to building just and sustainable societies through the social and productive organization of recycling workers and their families." Their mission also includes "improving the quality of life of all people and future generations."

MNCR started building its power in the way that so many other groups have done: by stopping incineration.

### **A Force to be Reckoned With**

When the incineration company Usina Verde rolled into Sao Paolo in 2002, it was widely expected that their incinerator proposal would move forward quickly and easily. Instead, [the company was pushed out by a coalition of recycling workers, NGOs, activists, and community members](#).

Magdalena Donoso, Latin America Coordinator for the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), explained that "The recycling workers of Brazil are a force to be reckoned with. Anytime there is a vote, public hearing, meeting, etc., the recycling workers turn up more people than the incinerator company."

But as with anti-incinerator movements all over the world, the question was always asked in Brazil: If not incinerators, then what? For the recycling workers of that nation, the answer was built into their job description.

The transition from fighting incinerators to working toward zero waste in Brazil came naturally. Beth Grimberg from [Instituto Pólis](#) explained that, "Zero waste alliances were being formed all over the world. We couldn't miss the opportunity to work on this. We had strong international solidarity and decades of organizing experience. On September 19th, with hundreds of people participating in person or online, we launched the Brazil Zero Waste Alliance."

Alex Cardoso, a third generation recycler and member of the MNCR, said, "It is important that recycling workers are the primary organizers for zero waste in Brazil. We are the ones on the streets every day making it happen. Our knowledge is critical. We are the principal agents in these conversations and the defenders of the earth."

There you have it: zero waste is clean air, good jobs, and justice. No wonder the brass band was playing and the crowd was singing down in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

# Cultivating Climate Justice:

## A Tale of Two Cities

This is a tale of two U.S. cities building solutions to the climate crisis from the bottom up.

We start in the Northeast of the country, with [Cooperative Energy, Recycling and Organics \(CERO\)](#), a newly formed worker-owned cooperative in Boston, Massachusetts. While providing family-supporting jobs for the community, CERO works with businesses on separating out materials that can be recovered. They then collect this waste in a truck and bring it to facilities where it can either be recycled or returned to the soil as compost.

CERO's [board members and employees](#) are people like Guadalupe Gonzalez and Josefina Luna, who have been recycling informally for years or decades. Guadalupe Gonzalez used to do backbreaking work, cleaning commercial buildings during the day while picking bottles from the trash at night. She was one of the thousands of underrated recycling workers, earning precious extra money to support her family.

Josefina Luna explains that, at CERO, "Now we can earn a living while protecting the environment."



CERO's first truck hit the road this past October, 2014. Lor Holmes, one of CERO's worker-owners and business managers, says that the coop is currently diverting four tons of organic waste per week from being buried or burned. Within a year, CERO expects to divert 1,000 tons of organic food waste and return it to the

soil. It will be working closely with its customers to help separate as much organic materials, like food waste, from garbage as possible.

[Boston only recycles about 30% of its waste](#), which means that 70% is sent to incinerators and landfills in surrounding communities, [polluting the air and contributing to climate change](#). Creative, bottom-up solutions like CERO eliminate the need to burn and dump waste by returning it to a closed-loop system instead.

Boston is not the only US city where zero waste activists have been making clear the links between climate, waste, and justice, and building solutions. This fall, residents of Detroit earned a hard-won victory: curbside recycling across the entire city.

Infamous for its shrinking manufacturing base and severe budget problems, Detroit is also a city plagued by cumulative impacts, which means a range of environmental pollution sources and other social and economic stressors. Cumulative impacts are a reality lived in many low-income communities and communities of color. Detroit is home to dozens of highly toxic and polluting facilities—including one of the [world's largest municipal solid waste incinerators](#).



The [Zero Waste Detroit](#) coalition came together with the mission of “advocating curbside recycling, a materials recovery system which will bring new jobs and economic development to the city, and an end to waste incineration,” according to [the group’s statement](#).

For twenty years, recycling efforts in Detroit have been blocked by a “put or pay” contract with the city’s incinerator. In other words, if the city did not send enough trash to be burned and reduced or recycled it instead, they would actually have to pay the incinerator company for income lost. In 2009—the very year that contract ended—curbside recycling started with three pilot programs. And last month, in October 2014, that was expanded across the city. There is still much work to be done to make curbside recycling a reality and ensure that recycling workers rights are respected, but it’s a major step.

For many of us, taking out the recycling is something we do because we know it’s good, but it’s not something whose impact we can immediately feel. For the folks of CERO in Boston and Zero Waste Detroit who are making city-wide recycling programs work, the impacts are clear. They are keeping trash out of landfills and incinerators, doing away with health-hazardous toxic smoke, and creating worker-owner jobs. This is what democracy looks like!

# Cultivating Climate Justice Through Compost:

## The Story of Hernani

When the people of Hernani, Spain, began a residential compost system, they weren't looking to become heroes of the movement for climate justice. Like thousands of other towns around the world, they were simply looking for an alternative to incineration and the pollution it brings.

Hernani is located in Basque country, in the province of Gipuzkoa. In 2002, the Gipuzkoa landfill was nearly full, and the provincial government proposed building two new incinerators to burn the trash. The citizens of Hernani and other municipalities of the province [immediately joined together in opposition](#). In a particularly impressive action, hundreds took the streets for what they called a "zero waste flash mob dance."

Not only did Hernani fight the incinerator plans (and very creatively), they also [began implementing zero waste strategies](#) that would help eliminate the need to burn or bury waste at all. Within a few years, Hernani became a center of composting excellence.

To start, the municipality of Hernani distributed collection bins for each household so that residents could separate compost, recyclables, and other garbage, and passed a law that made it mandatory for residents to comply. By the end of the first year, the municipality had sent 58.3% less waste to landfill than the previous year.

Jesús Pérez Gómez of the [Union Institute of Work, Environment and Health \(ISTAS\)](#) in Spain explained that "compost is a very simple technology. Yet it has the solution to so many things. It's good for the climate. It has the potential to reduce the high levels of unemployment in Spain. It reduces the toxins that impact agricultural workers. It reduces rates of cancer and other sicknesses. And we don't have to invent anything, we just have to engage in a natural process."



Just four years later, in October 2014, Hernani's composting program was so successful that it became a site visit in [training for recycling workers, lawmakers, and zero waste advocates from around the world](#).

Among the visitors were members of the [South African Waste Pickers Alliance \(SAWPA\)](#). "SAWPA supports a zero waste approach as it creates jobs, saves public money, and it combats climate change," said Simon Mbata, national spokesperson for SAWPA. "Organic waste is a critical waste stream within a zero waste approach but it's not included in South Africa's Waste Act [2008], so coming to this training has been really useful to start developing organic waste strategies back home," he added.



## **Even Better For the Climate Than We Thought**

New science indicates that compost may be even better for the climate than previously understood. [Research coming out of Marin County in California](#) shows that compost takes carbon dioxide out of the air, which is an essential for reversing climate change.

According to the Marin Carbon Project website, “Common agricultural practices, including driving a tractor, tilling the soil, grazing, and other activities, result in the return of CO<sub>2</sub> to the air....On the other hand, Carbon can be stored long-term (decades to centuries or more) in soils in a process called -‘soil carbon sequestration.’ Carbon Farming involves implementing practices that are known to improve the rate at which CO<sub>2</sub> is removed from the atmosphere and converted to plant material and/or soil organic matter.”

Talk about a win-win-win! Jobs, carbon-sequestration, and reduced toxic exposures for farmers and neighbors. For such a humble and ancient practice, composting is a powerful act. As the people of Hernani show us, when you organize to beat an incinerator, you never know how much good can come of it.