



CASE STUDIES SERIES  
ZERO WASTE LATIN AMERICA  
AND THE CARIBBEAN  
**WASTE PICKERS INCLUSION**

# Inclusion of waste pickers in Zero Waste programs: the case of Buenos Aires City

The GAIA Alliance brings together 130 organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean and more than 800 worldwide, which have in common to promote the Zero Waste strategy, with the aim of building a society in which the use of resources respects the ecological limits and everything that is produced returns to the productive system or to nature in a safe, environmentally and socially safe. And when this is not possible, those materials are redesigned, or stop being produced.



October, 2019

“Recycling without recyclers is garbage”. This phrase, which echoes throughout waste picker or “informal recycler” organizations in Latin America and The Caribbean, is essential when it comes to planning any waste management policy in a region which has around 4 million people working in the collection and processing of recyclable materials.

Today, the region has many examples of waste picker inclusion in municipal management programs. They are the result of decades of struggle, organizing, dialogue and conflict. This publication is not aimed to deepen those processes, but references are provided for readers who want to examine further. The objective of this case study is to show these examples and to offer tools to those seeking to design Zero Waste policies in contexts in which informal waste pickers exist. The case presented below focuses on the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina.

## City of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Population: 3 million. Area: 200 km<sup>2</sup>. RSD per capita: 1 kg/day

The process of gaining recognition as legitimate and legal actors in the management of recyclable waste in Buenos Aires began in the early 2000s. After a long history of dialogue, struggle, tensions, trial and error and a sustained organizational growth in the sector<sup>1</sup>, waste pickers or cartoneros as they are locally known, are now formally in charge of the collection and management of recyclables throughout the city. Some of the tools that made their inclusion a reality will be described below. The model of Buenos Aires relies on the co-management between the state and the cooperatives. It is a co-management as the state’s involvement is not only limited to hiring and controlling the tasks performed by the cooperatives. The state also provides permanent support, invests in facilities and provides the necessary tools to develop policies. This process has been driven by the largest cooperatives and has been developed over many years. Even though there is still much more to improve, today the system consolidates interesting and effective tools of inclusion.

### Legal Recognition

In 2002, Act N° 992<sup>2</sup> incorporated waste pickers into the public urban hygiene service as providers of differentiated collection, and repealed an ordinance prohibiting the activity. The Act created a registry of waste pickers and established a system to provide a credential and working uniform to those enrolled.

In 2005, Act N° 1854 known as the “Zero Waste” Law, established the guarantee and priority for the sector in the collection and processing of recyclable materials and enabled credits and subsidies for the acquisition of capital assets. These actions were taken within the framework of a major objective: to progressively reduce waste disposal in landfills, without incineration, through source segregation and the implementation of a set of measures aimed at reducing waste generation and maximizing its use through reuse, recycling, composting and biodigestion.



foto: Santiago Vivacqua

### Exclusive provision of recyclables collection service and payment

According to the current Zero Waste law, municipal solid waste (MSW) must be separated at source into “dry” (recyclable) and “wet” (organic and residual) and must be collected separately. The government hires the collection service of both types of waste through different bids so that waste pickers do not have to compete with private companies:

- For wet waste (organics and residual) the bid is made between private companies (6 at the moment) and an area is kept to be served by the state as a control area.
- For dry waste (recyclables) a bid was made only for recyclers’ cooperatives, recognizing the pre-existence of their work and collection areas, and the social nature of their service. The first contract was awarded in 2012 and since then it has been extended. Today, 12 cooperatives have a contract with the government and an assigned collection area.

In the case of the collection of recyclables, the contracts establish the following obligations for cooperatives:

- To collect recyclables door to door.
- To deliver recyclables to green centers (materials recovery facilities).
- Sorting.
- Member training.
- Actions to incorporate informal recyclers.
- Actions aimed to eliminate informal work and child labour.

And as obligations for the government:

- To allocate a budget for the service provision.
- To pay a compensation to each registered waste picker as an incentive, which is deposited in her bank account and is updated on a six-month basis.
- To provide to the cooperatives with winter and summer uniforms.
- To give on commodatum the necessary vehicles to provide the services, and the resources for their use and maintenance.
- To provide a childcare facility for waste pickers' children and to carry out the actions provided in an annual plan for the elimination of child labour.
- To guarantee access to social security, retirement, health insurance and personal accident insurance.
- To guarantee exclusivity for the cooperative in the area it serves.

It is also established that cooperatives cannot be fined for breaches of contract that are attributable to the government<sup>3</sup>.

To date most of the obligations of both parties have been met, although not without tensions, delays and reproaches. Despite this, the system is constantly improving. Nowadays, there are 5300 registered and included recyclers in the system. Each recycler is paid by the government a wage compensation of US\$ 260 (higher than the minimum wage), if they have perfect attendance (deductions are made for absences). This income is complemented by the sale of materials.

### **Door-to-door Collection**

In the city there are at least three different delivery and differentiated waste collection systems for recyclable household materials.

- Door to door collection with waste pickers.
- Street recycling containers: one container per block to drop recyclables.
- "Green points": collection points served by operators, which have containers placed in urban parks where citizens can drop their recyclable materials. Currently, there are around 90.

The door-to-door collection system carried forward by the cooperatives allows more communication and proximity to neighbours. Here a variety of systems also coexist, but the negotiation with the government has been the transition to a system that does not use of carts but have collecting points instead.



foto: Santiago Vivacqua

An example is the system used by the cooperative El Amanecer de los Cartoneros, which groups 3500 recyclers in the city. Recyclers go by bus from their area of origin (most of them live in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city) to their working area with a route delegate. At the same time a lorry leaves the material recovery facility and heads towards the collection area with empty bulk bags, which have a seal with the bag number, name of the waste picker and route number. In the area where the buses arrive there is a “group leader” from the government, who registers attendance and speaks to the delegates of each route. Recyclers take their bulk bag and go to their designated area, where they collect recyclables from all the houses. Usually, they already have the system coordinated with the people in charge of the buildings, which take out the materials during designated times or neighbours leave their bags with recyclables next to the black container where residual waste is thrown. Once the route is done, recyclers return to the bus and to their homes, and the bulky bags are transported to the sorting facility, where they are weighed and the amount of kilos per bag is registered. During weighing a government officer and route delegates are present, to control and inform each waste picker the next day about the amount of kilos they collected the previous day. At the end of the month, waste pickers receive a payment corresponding to the total amount of material collected (see below). To have more control, the cooperative developed an app that allows recyclers to access on their phone the current and historical register of collected material.

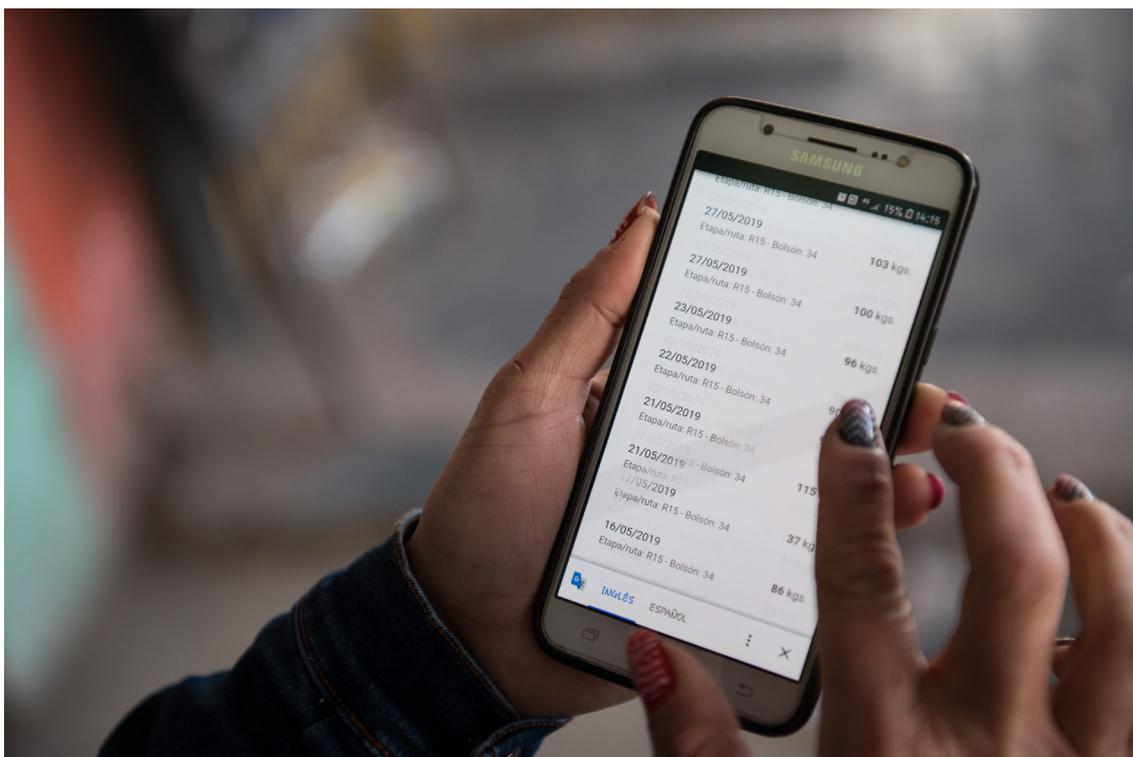


foto: Santiago Vivacqua

In the other systems, recyclables are dropped in containers in the collection points and then are transported to the cooperatives' materials recovery facilities for processing. The system of containers in public places has been the greatest source of objection amongst waste pickers, since it is more difficult to control the sorting of waste. Collection points have more control but opening hours are restricted and depend on people having to move several blocks from their homes with their recyclable materials.

The cooperatives also collect from big generators, which include among others, supermarkets, hypermarkets, public buildings, educational institutions, banks, 4 and 5 star hotels or those with capacity for more than 200 guests, places with more than 300 visitors, malls and shopping arcades, retail chains and those that generate more than 500 litres of waste a day.

### **Administration of materials recovery facilities**

There are 15 Materials Recovery Facilities in the city, in different variations (some are transfer stations for recyclables, others have processing machinery). All of them are managed by waste picker cooperatives. Three of them (one recently open) are mechanised, that is they sort recyclables with technology that combines manual and mechanical processes with methods that function by density, sensors, air currents among others. In the other centers, sorting is made manually, mainly using conveyor belts and machinery such as waste balers, forklifts, among others. However, not all facilities have the necessary equipment.



foto: Santiago Vivacqua

### Collective sale of materials

Each cooperative decides how to sell the materials, but the tendency has been collective selling. Since 2013, the cooperative Amanecer de los Cartoneros has a market system that solves several problems faced by both recyclers and the government. Under the current system, every day in the materials recovery facility bulky bags are weighed and registered to the corresponding waste picker. At the end of the month, the total amount of collected material is calculated and at the same time waste pickers have their total collection information. The total income from the sale of materials is then counted and divided according to the amount of kilos collected by all waste picker. This gives an average price per kilo of material, to which the government adds a small incentive. The average price plus the incentive are multiplied by the amount of material each waste picker collected during the month and this gives the final amount that is deposited into their bank accounts.

The system also has an incentive for each waste picker that exceeds an initial amount range, so they pass to the next range that gives a higher price.

A percentage of the total income from the sale of materials is used to cover the salary of the workers that do not collect and perform other tasks. 7% is divided between the operators who work at the sorting facility and 6% between logistic operators.

This system encourages waste pickers to collect all materials (not only those with the highest price) and instead of taking them to their homes to sort and sell them individually, they deliver recyclables to the sorting facility and take part of the collective sale, where they get better prices.

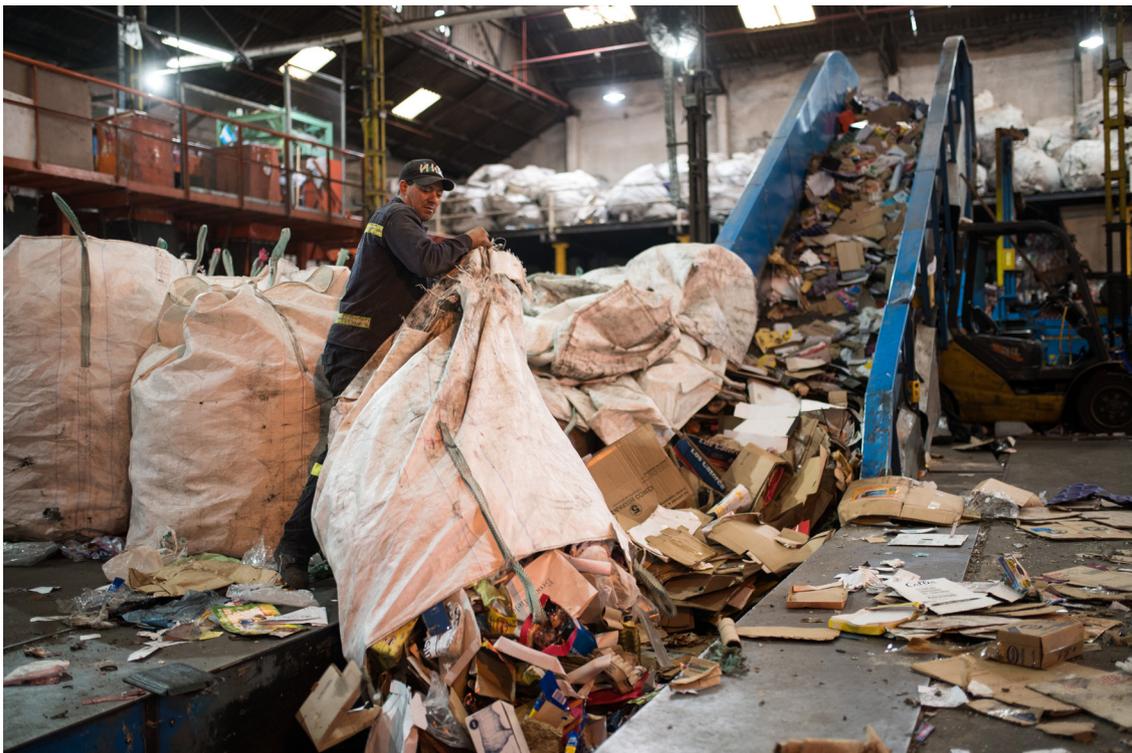


foto: Santiago Vivacqua

### Child care facilities for waste pickers' children

Understanding that social inclusion of waste pickers is not only a provision of a service but a comprehensive policy that meets the needs of the most underprivileged groups of the population, *Amanecer de los Cartoneros* signed an agreement with the city government to support the operation of two child care facilities for children from 6 to 15 years old and a day-care center for children from 3 months to 5 years old. The centers work during the afternoon and at night, while waste pickers are working, and receive 200 children a day<sup>4</sup>.

### Environmental promoters

Other improvements in the sector include the creation of a group of environmental promoters made up of women waste pickers, who perform awareness and educational tasks.

The program was developed as an initiative of the cooperatives since they saw that the government outsourced promotion and communication services, so they proposed to create a register of women waste pickers to hire for these tasks. Although the bill they presented to formalize the program did not pass, in 2014, with the support of the executive branch the first two groups were formed, giving another example of co-management between the government and waste picker cooperatives.

Today, the group of promoters is made up of 80 waste picker women who belong to 4 cooperatives. The number is growing, based on the availability of the cooperatives and the need to strengthen communications in their area.



Foto cortesía de Leticia Alves Canals

Promoters go door-to-door talking to neighbours, explaining how to sort recyclables and how the cooperative works. Then, they introduce each neighbour to the waste picker who collects on their block. This helps to form a bond and encourages increased participation in sorting waste. With the information they gather during the visits they make reports that allow the government to track participation in waste segregation at source. They also give talks and hold reuse workshops in schools. Promoters work half-time from Monday to Friday and are paid the same incentive as other waste pickers, and receive uniforms and basic material to do their work.

The transition from collecting materials to becoming environmental promoters poses a challenge. To prepare for this work, promoters receive an initial training of 20 meetings, in which they review regulations, put value and give a new meaning to the history of recyclable waste recovery. They also learn about differentiated collection systems, where the materials they recycle go, material reuse techniques, how to use forms, how to make field visits to the landfill and the recycling facility; they practice and incorporate communications tools, but most importantly, they start to become a group.

In addition to the initial training, once or twice a month each group works on specific topics such as updates on new regulations and new government programs, team work, communication techniques and other topics of interest for the promoters such as sexual and reproductive health, among others. The trainings are designed together by both the cooperatives and government group leaders.

Each group has a government official that takes attendance, digitizes the forms that promoters fill out on paper, and supports all processes and talks given. The rest of the government team is made up of a coordinator and sub-coordinator, two trainers and a person in charge of technical and logistical support.

Beyond the work done by the promoters, the government encourages sorting at source through posters, in schools, on the radio, on social media and at events. Cooperatives also use their networks and communication channels.

## Recycling and disposal

The city government estimates that 400 tons/day of materials are recycled, while cooperatives claim the number is around 800 ton/day. This data results in a recycling rate of 9% and 18% according to generation data provided by the city government<sup>5</sup>. The figure is still inaccurate since a significant flow of material is collected by informal recyclers and therefore is not registered. It is estimated that at least 5000 people collect independently.

The city has other recovery systems for organic waste and aggregates, which are not the subject of this document. In 2018, the city disposed of 1.07 million tons of MSW in the landfill, or around 2,900 ton/day.

## Organization of the sector

As mentioned at the beginning, the level of inclusion that waste pickers have today is to a large extent the result of the level of organization that the sector has reached, which has allowed higher negotiating and management capacity/ability. Most of the city's cooperatives are part of the Argentine Federation of Waste Pickers and Recyclers (FACCyR), which protects the rights of the sector throughout the country and promotes the implementation of a public recycling system, co-managed between the state and waste pickers. FACCyR is also part of the Confederation of Popular Economy Workers (CTEP), which provides union representation to the workers who are not part of formal economy.

## Challenges

As mentioned, the mechanisms described above have been the result of years of constant work made by waste pickers and other environmental organizations, dialogue, tensions, struggle, comings and goings. Although progress has been made in the inclusion of the sector and there are plans to introduce more recovery facilities, there is still an enormous budget disparity between landfilling and urban hygiene. The budget allocated for recycling and waste reduction in Buenos Aires in 2018 was 7 times lower than the one allocated for cleaning, collecting and sending to landfills<sup>6</sup>.

At the same time, what was projected in the Zero Waste law has been partially and slowly implemented, and it is at risk after its modification in 2018 to enable incineration. The city government is planning to build waste-to-energy incinerators, which will create an unequal competition for materials with greater calorific power, namely recyclable ones. This provision was made under an accelerated decision-making process and despite the opposition of most of the institutions that work in the city's

waste sector (including universities, recycling chambers, waste picker cooperatives, and environmental organisations, among others). The future is unknown, because this technology faces strong opposition and because it is clear that there is much more to be done in the field of reducing and recovering both recyclable and organic waste.

Another challenge is the number of waste pickers who are not part of any cooperative. This group is the most vulnerable and the one that is neglected in public policies. Although the responsibility to integrate them has been given to the cooperatives, the lack of resources makes it very difficult for that to happen without the support of the state. In the face of this situation, FACCyR is promoting recycling systems with waste pickers in the municipalities of the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, to provide opportunities to waste pickers living in those areas and who go to the city of Buenos Aires to carry out their work.

The example of the city of Buenos Aires is a model of public management of recyclable materials with social inclusion. In this model co-managed by waste pickers cooperatives and the state, collection and processing of materials is conducted by waste pickers, but with the support of the state and in permanent coordination between both parties. Recognizing that waste pickers come from a highly neglected sector, inclusion policies are not limited to waste management but they also include social issues.



foto: Cecilia Allen

**Sources:**

Argentine Federation of Waste Pickers and Recyclers  
Environmental Promoters Program, General Department of Recycling, City Government  
City Government of Buenos Aires

1. For more information see, Salvi, Nora: Hitos sociales e institucionales de las políticas de reciclado en Ciudad de Buenos Aires, available in <http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/663544/Hitos-Sociales-e-Institucionales-de-las-Polticas-de-Reciclado-en-Ciudad-de-Buenos-Aires/>

2. See <http://www.cedom.gov.ar/>

3. Based on Tognetti, Mariana: Experiencia de recolección diferenciada con inclusión social en la ciudad de Buenos Aires, Cumbre Regional sobre Sistemas de Reciclaje Inclusivo en América Latina y el Caribe. 2018, Bogotá, Colombia.

4. For more information, go to <http://anccom.sociales.uba.ar/2016/03/30/el-jardin-de-los-cartoneros/#.VxFc2vnhDIW>

5. Although the data on MSW generation provided by the government is inaccurate, the calculation is based on the figure that the city currently generates 7,300 ton/day of MSW. Additionally, 3,000 tons of construction and demolition waste are treated per day. Given the absence of more specifics, it is assumed that 4,300 tons of MSW are generated.

6. According to the 2018 budget law, the budget allocated to the General Directorate of Cleaning (in charge of the collection of wet waste and street cleaning) was around US \$250 million and to the General Directorate of Recycling and the Directorate of Treatment and New Technologies was approximately US \$36 million.