

INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICE FACTSHEETS ON POLICY
INSTRUMENTS THAT PROMOTE ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS
FOR GREEN AND CIRCULAR BUSINESSES

Waste Pickers

BRAZIL_



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BEST PRACTICE FACTSHEET

Urban waste collection in developing countries is often performed by informal waste pickers, who collect reusable and recyclable materials to sell to recycling companies. In this sense, waste pickers contribute to material recovery and a circular economy at local level, although often under difficult circumstances. Waste pickers all around the world are stigmatized and shunned as outcasts of society.

Only after significant struggle and persistence, did waste pickers in Brasil move from invisibility to acknowledgement as agents providing a public service. The contribution of these workers to urban waste management is now recognized by the National Policy on Solid Waste (NPSW) approved in 2010.

BACKGROUND



Waste pickers are individual collectors of reusable or recyclable materials, operating in an informal way, often in urban areas where public waste collection services are limited. Although lacking certain professional structures or standards, this does not mean they are not organised. At times, they collaborate in cooperatives and associations, able to achieve a significant level of separate waste collection, sorting, processing and selling of collected waste streams, thus contributing to material recovery in urban areas. In Brasil, they are responsible for the collection of almost 90% of all materials that are recycled (IPEA, 2012 ¹). Most importantly, this

activity generates income for vulnerable segments of the population. However, their work is usually poorly paid and underappreciated, as waste pickers often suffer from social exclusion in society.

There are currently approximately 800,000 waste pickers in Brazil, who either operate individually or collectively in cooperatives and associations (MNCR, 2019 ²). In recent years, Brazilian waste pickers accomplished important achievements in terms of formal recognition and reframing their role in the society, as well as in their role as relevant players in the recycling market.



The Waste Picker and his wagon, collecting recyclable materials at his working area.
Source: [Ancat](#)

¹ [Ipea.gob](#)

² [Mnct.org](#)

POLICY FRAMEWORK



To guarantee access to social security for this extremely vulnerable group, it was necessary to create and modify a series of regulations to formally recognise the profession of waste pickers. The first step was the registration of the activity of waste pickers in the Brazilian Code of Occupations (BCO) in 2002, which granted rights related to social security and retirement. Another milestone was the incorporation of waste pickers' cooperatives in the [National Policy of Solid Waste](#) (NPSW) as a fundamental component of Brazil's waste management system, approved in 2010, which encourages partnerships between waste pickers' associations, private companies and government agencies.

The approval of the NPSW was an important development for the Brazilian solid waste sector, establishing clear

responsibilities, goals and deadlines for solid waste management. The legislation obliges public entities to prepare solid waste plans, implement separate collection and close polluting landfills.

The NPSW establishes as a principle: "the recognition of reusable and recyclable solid waste as an economic good with social value, generating work and income" and waste pickers as a valuable actor in the product life-cycle, having shared responsibility together with "manufacturers, importers, distributors and traders, consumers and holders of public services of urban cleaning and solid waste management, to minimize the volume of solid waste generated, as well as to reduce impacts caused to human health and environmental quality resulting from the life cycle of products...".



Waste pickers segregating the trash inside the Cooperative.

Source: [Ancat](#)

IMPLEMENTATION



The implementation of the NPSW depends on the commitment at municipal level, as it only provides the general policy framework. With such a diversity of contexts and cultures within a single country, some municipalities were able to apply the NPSW and are considered successful cases while others have not yet reached the goals proposed by the policy. The city of Londrina, in the Paraná state, stands out as an example of efficient management of recyclable materials, with the inclusion of waste pickers.

Londrina has had a recycling program since 1996. The inclusion of waste pickers in this system occurred through a municipal program which started in 2001 and in the second semester of the same year, the recyclable material collection service had grown from 30 thousand to 50 thousand residences, achieving more than 35% of the entire city of Londrina. In 2009, the local government encouraged the independent waste pickers to organize themselves into cooperatives and also promote the improvement of existing recycling practices, through a municipal decree.

Nowadays, Londrina has approximately 400 waste pickers divided into 33 associations. In order to create a better organized network collection system with social inclusion for waste pickers, the city was divided into sectors and assigned to the 33 associations. In this

system, the recyclable materials are collected in each sector by a designated picker, mainly in wagons pulled by people, providing citizens with a convenient door-to-door collection service. The material is stored at an intermediary collection point and later hauled away by a truck, thereby minimising the distance travelled by the truck and its fuel consumption. The integration of the waste pickers within the waste management process was fostered by civil servants who also helped to raise awareness on the environmental importance of separate waste collection and the important role of waste pickers in society.

RESULTS



By November 2011, the separate waste collection system in Londrina was serving around 67,500 houses with door-to-door collection. In December of the same year, with the collaboration of another cooperative, they were able to collect from over 95,224 homes, expanding the coverage to 77% of the total homes in the city. The total amount of recyclable waste sold in 2011 was 4,665 tons and the coverage rate for selective collection in relation to the urban population was 100%. Therefore, Londrina managed to promote social inclusion, generate work and income, improve the living conditions of waste pickers and achieve resource recovery.

The environmental benefits of this kind of waste management model has been elaborated in the [Anuário da Reciclagem](#) (years 2017 and 2018), a report developed in partnership between two institutions in which 270 cooperatives and associations present in 148 municipalities and 20 Brazilian states are analysed. The report shows that the volume recovered by the activity of these cooperatives and associations is equivalent to a potential of 36,000 tons of CO₂ in 2017 and 29,000 tons of CO₂ in 2018. These results are mainly from the decrease in the production of virgin materials equivalent to the volume collected (82% of the total CO₂ reduction potential), while the remaining 18% results from the reduction of waste disposal in

places such as landfills and dumps, reducing the methane emitted during the anaerobic decomposition of the materials. These numbers emphasize the importance of waste pickers and their role in environmental protection.

SUCCESS FACTORS



One of the main factors that allowed the waste pickers to gain visibility was the creation of formal associations such as the National Movement of Waste Pickers. The organisation was created and managed by the waste pickers and it gave them a platform to establish an identity, claim a role within the existing waste collection system and express their demands. As a result of the sustained efforts of this group of workers, their activity is not seen as a result of a social problem, but as a socio-environmental solution.

The other key factor for success was the support of local governments that fostered the integration of waste pickers into the community's waste management services. A clearly identified regulatory framework that recognizes associations of waste pickers can also accelerate the process, however, it should be noted that in Londrina, waste pickers and cooperatives have been actively participating in the city's recycling system since 2001, nine years before the implementation of the NPSW.

Given the widespread practice of informal waste picking throughout the world, there is a good opportunity to replicate this best practice outside of Brazil. As demonstrated here, the organization of waste pickers in cooperatives can lead to the expansion of separate collection recycling services, facilitate partnerships with municipal

government and companies and provide better working conditions for waste pickers.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE MEDITERRANEAN



The informal waste sector in the Mediterranean is probably different from Brasil. Therefore, firstly, an analysis should be performed to understand better their numbers, functioning and needs. Secondly, their professionalisation should be encouraged through the creation of associations and cooperatives (if these do not already exist) to strengthen their position and represent this diverse group in discussions with public authorities and private recycling companies. As a next step, the role of waste pickers in the solid waste management system can be formally recognised and supported through national waste policies and local programmes.

_MORE INFO

[Ancat; Pragma \(2019\). Anuário da reciclagem 2017 – 2018](#)

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