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ON THE COVER

"Descarga Cero" by Jake Kheel, environmental director of Punta Cana Resort & Club in the Dominican Republic, shows waste before being processed in its ambitious Zero Waste Program.



Transforming Values

The Impact of Bogotá's Public Trash Collection Service **BY JULIA LEITNER**

MOUNDS OF GARBAGE AMASSED ON STREET corners, in front of houses. Bags splayed open, spilling onto the sidewalks, filling the city with stench. For three days, between December 18 and 20, 2012, trash piled up on the streets of Colombia's capital city, a city of eight million residents. This period marked the handover of waste collection in Bogotá from private companies to public entities. For those who had ignored the previous months of debate on garbage collection, the problem was brought to the forefront, to the sidewalks, and a fetid phenomenon opened a discussion on environmental responsibility, social and political inclusion, private vs. public interests and the profitability of garbage.

By the start of 2015, the experiment of public waste management will have to come to an end and the service contracts will once again open to bidding from both private and public companies. The

reaction to Mayor Gustavo Petro's new scheme of trash collection brought to light the intricate interplay of public, private, and marginalized forces involved in the business of garbage. While the political backlash involving Petro has captured media attention, the case of trash reform in Bogotá holds important national, international, local and environmental implications, of which Petro is merely a catalyst, not the protagonist.

AN EXCLUSIVE BUSINESS

When Petro took office in 2012, he inherited a problem that had been brewing for a decade. For 25 years, the public entity Unidad Administrativa Ejecutiva de Servicios Públicos (UAESP) had contracted four private companies to operate garbage collection in Bogotá. In the cracks within the waste collection system work the recyclers, a marginalized population that makes its living by collecting recy-

Basura Cero (Zero Waste) street cleaner works in front of a green mural in Bogotá.

clable materials and selling these materials to intermediaries, who then sell them to recycling plants. Recyclers roam the streets, filling makeshift carts or packs with cardboard, paper, plastics, glass bottles and metals. In 2002 the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (Bogotá Association of Recyclers) filed a suit with the Colombian Constitutional Court against UAESP, claiming that the public entity had excluded the recyclers from competing in public bidding for waste collection contracts and thus "denied their fundamental rights to due process, equality, work, and acts of good faith." The recyclers proposed to enter as a formal company into the bidding process and thus formalize the work of the recyclers and create their own recycling plants.



Clockwise from left: Christmas tree is constructed from plastic bottles; recycler Carlos “La Peluca” works on Avenida Caracas in Bogotá; cleaning Bogotá streets is not an easy task.

Although the Constitutional Court resolved in favor of the recyclers and required their integration into city trash collection services, the problem remained unresolved for many years. The Court issued three more judicial decrees in favor of the recyclers. The city government continuously failed to adequately address the problem.

Petro took dramatic action when he entered office. Contracts with the four private companies ended in December 2012. Several months into his term, Petro announced that he would not renew the contracts and would instead increase the capacity of public entities Empresa Acueducto de Bogotá and its affiliate Aguas de Bogotá, to provide services of waste collection, recycling, water sanitation and street cleaning.

The public entities charged with taking over waste collection were severely underprepared when the handover took place on December 18, 2012. Petro's administration had three months to buy trash compactors, plan routes and hire staff. An overly ambitious endeavor from the beginning, it was also poorly managed.

Petro's proposal defied strong private and political powers. He had meddled in private interests, a "mafia" as he denounced them, that had monopolized waste management for a quarter century and failed to fulfill political mandates. The cost of garbage collection in Bogotá, as well, was very high, something that has changed under public management.

"One of the reasons that it was expensive is because it's a service that was based on a monopoly, a private monopoly that no one challenges, no one pokes," explains Sandra Borda, a political science professor at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá. "Petro openly challenged this. What has to be known in this case is that these contractors in Bogotá, who control not only the garbage business but also other public services in Bogotá, have close ties to the traditional political class of the country."

Petro sought to reform a public service that had gone under the radar, that no one paid much attention to and merely accept-

ed the costs. The attempt to implement change revealed a powerful core of mixed private and public parties that benefited from an activity that few people recognize as lucrative: garbage collection. Tight-lipped private interests and marginalized recycling population, two contrasting groups, profit greatly from a fundamental public service that remains inconspicuous unless something goes wrong.

THE SCANDAL WITH BOGOTÁ'S MAYOR

Much about waste disposal in Bogotá has been overshadowed by the histrionics of a mayor that many love to hate. Petro, a former leftist militant, has been the favorite piñata for conservative groups and a media scapegoat. Borda characterizes Petro, a former member of the urban guerrilla group M-19, as a political "outsider," someone who has positioned himself constantly against the establishment.

Petro was removed from office a year after the December 18 fiasco by order of Inspector General Alejandro Ordóñez, a bastion of ultra-conservative powers in Colombia, but after six weeks out of office, he was reinstated by President Juan Manuel Santos, just in time for the May 2014 presidential elections. Petro offered his support to the incumbent, an unusual move by someone who often criticized Santos' administration. In the latest rebuff, Petro and several other public officials were slapped with a major fine by the City Superintendence of Industry and Commerce. Petro will have to pay 410 million pesos (more than US\$ 200,000) in restitution for the problems caused by trash collection.

Petro also demonstrated his ideological flexibility when he took office again in April 2014 in exchange for supporting Santos' reelection. Once a champion against corruption, Petro is now being investigated in his handling of the multi-million dollar transactions that switching the waste services required.

WHAT REMAINS

"Today, we can say that the cost of trash collection has decreased. Today, we can say

that 8,000 recyclers are receiving income for collection and transport. Today, we can say that recyclers are collecting 1,500 tons daily of recyclable materials that are not dumped. Today we can say that a public waste collection company has grown. These are advances that if you compare with the situation before are undoubtedly achieving important objectives, but that the traditional propaganda and media deny because, clearly, all this diminishes the income of those who traditionally managed the services," says Argemiro Plaza Crespo, an adviser in the municipal Department of Economic Development and economist who worked for more than twenty years as a community organizer with the recycling populations of several Colombian cities.

In the current administration, Plaza Crespo is working on a plan to build a recycling plant for the recyclers. This recycling plant is meant to benefit those who have normally been excluded from the profits of converting tons of waste materials into new products.

With garbage collection and recycling under public management, several departments in the municipal government collaborate to develop programs to change the culture and system of collection in Bogotá. Chief among these is a program called Basura Cero (Zero Garbage), an international effort in several cities around the world to stymie the environmental impact of waste disposal. Basura Cero seeks to educate the public and provide strategies for reducing solid waste in Bogotá, increasing recycling, separating materials at the source, implementing systems to convert recyclable materials, protecting the environment, and including the vulnerable population of street recyclers into the economic cycle of waste disposal.

Basura Cero seeks solutions for the concerns raised in the 2003 Constitutional Court ruling. UAESP and Basura Cero hope to identify and open a bank account for each of Bogotá's recyclers, paying recyclers not only for the materials they turn in but also for time and transportation. Basura Cero also seeks

to better coordinate routes of collection (which today are subject to the individual recyclers) and also provide better means of transportation (swapping a handheld cart for a pickup truck, for example).

Today, of the 13,694 recyclers counted in a citywide census, around 8,000 are registered with the government and receive pay from public accounts. Receiving and weighing centers for recyclables, bodegas, are required to register with the government to standardize the pay for materials.

Carlos “La Peluca,” a recycler who works a route on the busy Avenida Caracas in downtown Bogotá, can’t remember how long he’s worked as a recycler, decades at least, and he says that many have benefited from the new model. With a crutch and pushing a loaded cart of cardboard and plastics, he says that he hopes to receive around 10,000 pesos (about US\$5) for his haul. He rents a room in a nearby zone for 6,000 pesos a night.

Previously, trash companies received a percentage based on the amount of trash collected. This led to a lack of incentives to separate and recycle trash. Garbage collectors would haul away everything, leaving nothing for the recyclers and disposing tons of recyclable materials in the landfill. These same collectors now receive a fixed monthly rate.

Adriana Gómez Unda, an analyst and educator in Basura Cero, coordinates recycling education programs in local schools. She is enthusiastic about the principles and ideas of Basura Cero, but admits that it has been a difficult administration to work under. It is “visionary,” though also “extremely disorderly.” The recycling population also proved difficult to work with, resistant to changes and wary of what will happen after public management ends. There have been problems with fraud in licensed weighing centers, which receive pay from the government. Although separation of materials is now required by law, bags of recycling still often go to the landfill. Additionally, political processes have often slowed progress: Ordóñez deposed both the director of UAESP and Empre-

sa Acueducto de Bogotá at the same time as Petro.

While the programs implemented under Petro are well-intentioned and forward-looking, both Plaza Crespo and Gómez Unda express similar frustration with the adverse effects of Petro’s political blunders. The conservative political backlash and harsh media interpretations of Petro’s admitted mismanagement negatively impact the entities that are looking for the solutions to larger problems of social inclusion and environmental preservation.

At the heart of the matter is a source of funding. Petro reached into the pockets of several profitable businesses, and now he is paying the consequences politically and financially. The real impact of the imposition of recycling, however, lies in the transformation of a seemingly valueless substance into something of value. The citizens in Bogotá are also participating in a process of cultural transformation, to begin to rethink and recognize the importance and possibilities of recycling.

“We have a lot to do in terms of generating consciousness,” says Plaza Crespo. “We should think about the future, in that dumping trash in the 21st century is not the best practice. Today global society has transformed its practices, its waste management. And we should take advantage of this human advancement, these cultural changes, and integrate them into the practices of our country. It’s a big challenge.”

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS

In December 2013, a year after the handover and as the Inspector General determined his decision to dismiss Petro, a group of artists, in collaboration with 400 municipal employees, mounted a giant Christmas tree constructed from 6,000 PET bottles in front of the Institute of Urban Development. Samuel Córdoba Olier and Catalina López of Fundación Promedio use recycled materials on a variety of artistic, architectural, and educational projects. For four years they have worked together under the princi-

ple that what they make should benefit the place, the planet, the city (Bogotá) where they live.

The Christmas tree was not built in support of the city’s changing politics around recycling. However, over the years Samuel and Catalina have found that their work is “no longer something artistic, but it becomes a model, a pilot or a formula that can be repeated for sustainable behavior.”

The Christmas tree was an attempt to involve employees in the physical transformation of recyclable bottles. Once you take materials out of the trash bin and use them for a different purpose, comments López, people begin to see recycling in a different way.

The challenge is to get citizens to see recycling and garbage differently, as sources of revenue and income for poor and elite alike. Taking advantage of recyclable materials means closing an economic circle, reducing waste and adding value to new, recycled products. To do so requires imagination.

Petro’s model has been far from perfect. His reputation is tarnished by corruption and mishandling, but his fight also demonstrated the dominance of a certain political class and the difficulties of Colombia’s left.

Nevertheless, Bogotá is undergoing a process of transformation. Even once the experiment of public waste management ends, the inclusion of recyclers in the system has become law, trash and recycling are now separated into white and black bags, and separation of materials is mandatory. With the installation of recycling plants, Bogotanos will begin to see the transformation of materials back into products and experience the results of cultural changes underway.

Julia Leitner graduated from Harvard College in 2013 with a degree in History and Literature, certificate in Latin American Studies. She is currently in Colombia conducting research with Cultural Agents program at the Universidad Nacional and working as a community organizer in the coffee region.