

WINTER 2015

# ReVista

HARVARD REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICA



# GARBAGE



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## GARBAGE

### FIRST TAKE

Waste by *Marty Chen* 2

### TRANSFORMATIONS

Trash as Treasure by *William L. Fash and E. Wyllys Andrews* 8  
Recycle the Classics by *Doris Sommer* 11  
A Recycling (of) Tradition: A Photoessay by *Andrew Lantz* 14  
Trash into Treasure by *Tina Montalvo and Charles Martin* 16

### RECYCLING LIVES

Living off Trash in Latin America by *Martin Medina* 20  
Recycling Livelihoods by *Lucía Fernández and Martha Chen* 25  
Ciudad Saludable by *Albina Ruiz Ríos* 29  
The Sound of Garbage by *Rocío López Íñigo* 32  
A Long Way from the Dump by *Evelyn Mansilla* 34

### THE ART OF TRASH

Trash Moves by *Maite Zubiaurre* 38  
Beautiful Trash by *Paola Ibarra* 41  
Daniel Lind-Ramos by *Lowell Fiet* 44  
A Present from the Sea by *Sonia Cabanillas* 46  
Burning Messages by *Michael Wellen* 48  
Haiti in the Time of Trash by *Linda Khachadurian* 50  
Thinking on Film and Trash by *Ernesto Livon-Grosman* 53

### CONFRONTING WASTE

Privatizing Latin American Garbage? It's Complicated... by *Sarah Hill* 56  
Trash in the Water by *James Howe and Libby McDonald* 60  
Zero Waste in Punta Cana by *Jake Kheel* 63  
Recycling in Guatemala: A Photoessay by *Kellie Cason O'Connor* 66  
Buenos Aires by *Jessica Sequeira* 70  
Transforming Values by *Julia Leitner* 73

## IN EVERY ISSUE

### BOOK TALK

Breeding Gangs 77  
*A Review by Marcela Valdes*

Art as Civic Acupuncture 79  
*A Review by Pedro Reina-Pérez*

Bringing the War to Mexico 80  
*A Review by Andrea Oñate*

Tracing Back Marijuana Stigma 82  
*A Review by Viridiana Ríos*

### BUILDING BRIDGES

We Make Things Happen 84  
*by Marcela Rentería*

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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.

# Recycling Livelihoods

A Global Network Supports Waste Pickers  
in Latin America **BY LUCÍA FERNÁNDEZ AND MARTHA CHEN**

**STANDING FOR LONG HOURS IN LINE TO RECEIVE** your first paycheck may sound pretty stressful. However, for recyclers in Bogotá, their first paycheck was a huge victory after more than twenty years of legal and political struggles—proof of the power of committed partnerships between academics and workers in the informal economy.

In 2010, the global action-research-policy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB) conducted joint research on a waste management financial modeling tool. In late 2011, Colombia's Constitutional Court ruled that waste picker associations should be allowed to bid for solid waste management contracts, mandating that their organizers should submit bids by March 2013. ARB used the financial modeling

tool in preparing its successful bid—a historical legal victory for waste pickers. Beginning in March 2013, thousands of wastepickers have been getting paid for the tons of recyclable materials they collect every day from the streets of Bogotá.

The Bogotá model for integrating waste pickers, through their organizations, into the existing municipal solid waste management is to be replicated across Colombia, according to a recent decision by the Ministry of Environment, showing what is possible when municipal governments decide to partner with waste pickers and their associations. It is also a powerful example of WIEGO's work with waste pickers in Latin America over the past six years, in this case in collaboration with ARB and the efforts of WIEGO's regional waste picker coordinator in Bogotá, Federico Parra.



## WASTE PICKERS WITHOUT BORDERS

In March 2008, WIEGO and the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB) co-hosted the first international conference in the Colombian capital of waste pickers, meeting in Bogotá. Latin America was chosen as the venue for the conference as it was the first region to have a regional network of informal worker organizations: Red Latinoamericana de Recicladores (Red Lacre). More than 300 recyclers and their supporters from 34 countries around the world participated in the conference.

The two of us met at that conference. Lucía Fernández, who had done pioneering work in support of waste pickers across Latin America from her native Uruguay, was asked to coordinate the event and eventually became WIEGO's global waste picker coordinator. Martha (Marty) Chen, WIEGO's co-founder and international coordinator, announced in a speech that WIEGO was planning to work with and support waste pickers and their associations around the world, as we had done with home-based workers and street vendors since 1997 when WIEGO was founded. Today we support the virtual platform [globalrec.org](http://globalrec.org) for the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers, sharing more than thousands news from waste pickers around the world.

## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSION IN BRAZIL

Brazil did not win the last football World Cup, but waste pickers there, known as *catadores de materiais reciclables*, won the contract to collect waste from the 12 World Cup stadiums. Thus, around 840 *catadores* organized in cooperatives were able to recover more than 400 tons of recyclable materials—a major victory that likewise had years of “training” behind it. Brazil is the country with the most experience, not only in Latin America but internationally, in organizing waste pickers and securing support for them from the government and civil society. The Movimento Nacional de Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis (MNCR)

began building a national network of organizations of waste pickers across Brazil in 2001. Today, MNCR has more than 80,000 *catadores* in its membership, organized into local cooperatives and sub-national networks.

Sonia Dias from Belo Horizonte, Brazil, WIEGO's waste picker sector specialist, has worked for the recognition and professionalization of *catadores* for nearly thirty years since her early involvement in the Waste and Citizenship forum of Minas Gerais. More recently, she has focused her research and activism on gender relations and dynamics among waste pickers with a view to increasing women's leadership in these organizations and networks. In 2013, after a participatory research process, WIEGO, MNCR and a local university launched a Gender and Waste project. It seeks to understand the multiple levels of discrimination that women waste pickers face in the home and workplace, and as leaders in their networks and movements. “This project is very important for us women recyclers, as it has enabled us to exercise our autonomy,” said MNCR leader Madalena Duarte. Hundreds of Brazilian women recyclers have been empowered through the Gender and Waste project, one of the first of its kind in Latin America. WIEGO expects to scale up the project and continue to empower women recyclers, disseminating the findings of the project while starting a similar process with women waste pickers from other countries in Latin America.

**Previous: Waste pickers work in one of the world's largest dumpsites, La Chureca, Managua, Nicaragua, 2013. Top left: Catadores from the Brazilian movement of waste pickers MNCR during a street demonstration at RIO+20, Rio de Janeiro, June 2012; Top right: Working as a waste picker for more than 50 years in Managua, Nicaragua, February 2012; Bottom: The mountain on the left is made by waste; in the background is a typical natural Nicaraguan mountain, February 2012.**







**Recicladores from the Association of Recyclers of Bogotá sort waste at one of their cooperatives during field visits during the First World Conference of Waste Pickers in March 2008.**

#### RECYCLING IN NICARAGUA

For more than fifty years, Juana Rafaela Juárez collected, sorted and sold recyclable materials at a landfill in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. In February 2012, with Red Lacre and Red de Emprendedores del Reciclaje de Nicaragua (RedNica), Lucía Fernández and other WIEGO colleagues co-organized the first regional conference of waste pickers in Central America. They named the conference after Juana Rafaela, in honor of her hard work and who also stands as a symbol of countless anonymous waste pickers.

The year before, WIEGO had supported an extensive mapping of waste pickers in Central America carried out by the leaders of established waste pickers organizations in the region. They visited ten countries in Central America and the Caribbean, meeting their peers, most of whom were unorganized, promoting and encouraging the importance of the organization as a way to improve their

livelihoods and protect individuals from the threats facing the sector. In Central America, as in the rest of Latin America, privatization of the collection and disposal of waste together with the use of technologies, notably incinerators, that do not promote recycling were identified as the key threats faced by waste pickers.

#### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In 2008, when the international conference was held in Bogotá, only five countries were part of Red Lacre, the regional network of waste picker organizations: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay. Today, national networks or movements of recyclers exist in 12 more Latin American and Central American countries: Bolivia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico and Venezuela. Red Lacre continues to be a pioneer model for waste pickers from other regions, organizing waste pickers

and integrating them into national policies and city schemes for solid waste management. WIEGO is grateful to be able to continue to support these processes, knowing that there are many challenges ahead for waste pick to secure their livelihoods and dignify their profession.

*Lucía Fernández is an international specialist on informal recycling, working for more than ten years with waste pickers organizations from 20 countries. She is an architect with a Master's degree in ethics and sustainable development and had a research affiliation with MIT.*

*Martha Alter Chen is a lecturer in public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, an affiliated professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and international coordinator of the global research-policy-action network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).*