

WINTER 2015

# ReVista

HARVARD REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICA

# GARBAGE





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# Ciudad Saludable

## Building Healthy Models for Cities **BY ALBINA RUIZ RÍOS**

**I HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING BORN IN THE** jungle of Peru to campesino parents. They were people of infinite wisdom from whom I learned many things in my life: most importantly, to think of others and not to bow down to adversity. As there was no university in my jungle, I moved to Lima at sixteen to study industrial engineering and found myself amid mountains of trash. In my world in the jungle we did not have trash. All leftovers went to our animals and without knowing it, my parents showed me how to recycle and live sustainably, even though these terms did not become a part of my life until many years later.

When I moved to Lima and discovered trash, I also discovered that it stays where the poor live. Why wasn't trash collected in the human settlements where I resided? I hitched rides on garbage trucks around the city to answer this question for my thesis. I soon saw that the trucks were unable to navigate the piles of garbage in the street or travel up the hills where the poor lived, but the limitations were not simply mechanical. Authorities claimed that those who live in these places like to live in filth and were unwilling to pay for services. Nothing could be further from the truth. My neighbors wanted to be clean and were willing to pay for it, but at a fair price and when services were actually delivered. (Corruption was another critical factor—often contracted services showed up only occasionally or never at all.)

What saddened me most was not the trash itself, but the people living not only in it but also from it, eking out a livelihood as garbage pickers. That's when I started to develop a program now known as Ciudad Saludable (Healthy City). From the very beginning, I knew we had to involve them in the solution, particularly poor single mothers whose children often got

sick from living in a garbage dump. Single, unemployed mothers made up our first informal waste collector enterprises, so we were able to tackle unemployment along with unsanitary conditions. The local enterprises collected and processed garbage, charging affordable fees and separating recyclables. At first it was tough to explain to neighbors that paying a fee for waste collection was better than treating diarrhea. But once we achieved this mindset change, there was no turning back; families wanted waste collection because they knew it would improve their quality of life. While at the beginning it was just a simple, low-cost model making use of local resources and labor, we later incorporated these informal waste collectors into municipal waste management systems, creating long-lasting change.

**What saddened me most was not the trash itself, but the people living not only in it but from it, eking out a living as garbage pickers.**

I then joined Ashoka, a network of people with innovative ideas, and discovered my new vocation: social entrepreneur. I discovered a world of many "crazy" people like me, social entrepreneurs around the globe that Ashoka selects and links in its supportive network, people who believe things can change and employ real solutions to problems. Ashoka and my peers pushed and supported me to think about replicating my idea for greater impact. I had long rejected founding my own organization because of fears that leading an organization would take me out of the field, but Ashoka showed me I was sitting on an idea that could be helping cities around the world; I had to open up and

share it with others.

Ciudad Saludable was born as an instrument of change to build a community-based solid-waste management system and to spread that model throughout Peru and the world. Our program, Pro Reciclador, works with all actors in the value chain of recycling, particularly at the base of the pyramid, as the lowest income individuals are called. Recyclers receive assistance to form formal micro-enterprises and to implement recycling programs in tandem with local governments. They also gain access to comprehensive healthcare and financing for their recycling operations, as well as contact with export companies to directly sell recycled materials. Through our program Ciudadanía Ambiental, we also work with schools to teach students and

parents about waste sorting and how to implement it in their everyday lives.

As Ciudad Saludable grew as an organization, we asked ourselves how many years we would need to change the entire world, city by city. We recognized that we could never live the 500 years necessary to do this, so we had to accelerate the process. Instead of building new ciudades saludables, our goal became to promote other change makers who would adopt the model of Ciudad Saludable and make it their own. We shifted from managing programs to working for system change.

When we formed our first recycling association in Peru in 1998, we didn't dream that one day we would see hun-



**Above: Albina Ruiz (right) talks with recycler; Opposite page, from top left, clockwise: Workers sort garbage in a collection center; A woman empties recycled materials in a collection center; Vacationers play an educational game about recycling trash on a Peruvian beach.**

dreds of these organizations across Latin America. But then we realized replication itself was not enough to truly change the status quo. We had to change the system by influencing public policy on inclusive waste management and building alliances with public and private institutions. We learned how to dialogue with politicians and business leaders, but most importantly, how to empower our own neighbors in recycling collectives to join us in being change makers. We formalized this new outlook in our program Basura Cero (Trash Zero), which promotes technical and legal norms at various levels of the public sector, develops sustainable and inclusive solid-waste management plans and created a post-graduate program in solid-waste management through the Universidad Católica. This new focus resulted in the first law regulating recycling activity passed in the world, Law 29419 in Peru in 2009, and we are working with other countries to replicate this achievement. We also helped roll out a publicly admin-

istered incentives program that brought formalized recycling programs to 205 Peruvian municipalities in 2013.

My dream is that all other developing countries would have comprehensive, sustainable and inclusive waste management systems involving those living at the base of the economic pyramid and strengthening the value chain of recycling; we will achieve that when everyone in the process becomes an actor of change. I remember the night I met Sonia Quispe Taco and her mother opening trash bags in the center of Lima to collect food for their pigs. Sonia listened intently when I told her we were establishing a recycler collective. After becoming a devoted recycler and collective leader, she later opened her own business, Ecomanos, which makes art from recycled paper. She was very nervous about her meeting with the manager of an upscale Lima art gallery, but she called me afterwards, so excited that they had invited her to a glass of wine to discuss the final agreement, entrepre-

neur to entrepreneur. Even though her early death took her from us, her legacy of well-trained and motivated colleagues continues her work. We are encouraged to see that around Peru and in a number of other countries, opportunities continue to grow for families like Sonia's with the increasing adoption of integrated solid-waste management programs. However, we know we have quite a way to go until people truly see garbage as an opportunity instead of a problem.

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***Leah Scott-Zechlin**, an intern for the Ashoka Globalizer, contributed to this article.*

