

WINTER 2015

ReVista

HARVARD REVIEW OF LATIN AMERICA

GARBAGE





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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.

The Sound of Garbage

The Landfill Harmonic Orchestra

BY ROCÍO LÓPEZ ÍÑIGO

THE RECYCLERS IN CATEURA, ASUNCIÓN'S MUNICIPAL garbage dump, live from the trash and, in many cases, among the trash. The fetid odor carried along by the wind from Cateura to the nearby communities of Bañado Sur is intense, since the area has no sewage system and the service of running water is deficient. Children often work alongside adults picking trash or as street vendors instead of going to school—school attendance is only 40 percent. However, a sweet melody has now emerged among the discarded metal, plastic and smelly refuse: the Landfill Harmonic Orchestra, which in Spanish is known by the more evocative name, la Orquesta de Instrumentos Reciclados de Cateura—the Orchestra of Instruments Recycled From Cateura.

When environmental engineer Favio Sánchez, now 39, arrived in the community eight years ago to work on a waste recycling project, he found the conditions in the dump, one of the focal points of environmental tension in the Paraguayan capital, startling. The dump received—and continues to receive—800 tons of garbage daily. Only a few feet away from the banks of the Paraguay River with its continual threat of flooding, the dump is home to some 2,500 families who squat in small shanty towns near the garbage dump, their primary source of income. These *gancheros* recycle what the rest of the city has cast aside. Whether it's cold, rainy or very hot—Asunción can reach temperatures of 110 degrees in the summer—the residents of Cateura pick through the trash to make a few dollars.

To get closer to the families, he began teaching music to the children who approached him, curious about this stranger in the dumps. None of the kids could afford a musical instrument to

practice on. After a day of musical lessons, they would always go home without being able to feel an instrument in their own hands. But soon they got the idea of looking for raw materials in the trash, recycling them and transforming them into guitars, cellos and flutes.

Nicolás “Cola” Gómez, a Cateura recycler, took charge of the creation of the string and wind instruments. Although he had never seen a violin, his sheer determination and talent in carpentry transformed him into a “trash magician.” Oil tin cans, bottle caps, pieces of metal tubes, even forks, all served to put together musical instruments. The children learned to play Mozart, Beethoven, Henry Mancini and even the Beatles on their makeshift creations.

The project has grown from a mere ten children in 2006 to more than two hundred music learners today, with 35 children actually in the orchestra. All of them live in conditions of extreme poverty, with all that that signifies: broken families, street violence, drugs and alcoholism. Although it rises out of the trash, the project's emphasis is not only on its environmental value, but in what it teaches children about effort, cooperation, tolerance and leadership—qualities that are all too often absent from their communities. To be a member of the Landfill Harmonic Orchestra requires commitment. Sánchez puts much emphasis on shaping values, but cautions that it's too early to measure results. “Time will tell,” he says.

Thanks to the documentary by Juliana Penaranda-Loftus, *Landfill Harmonic*, the children of the orchestra have begun to travel to travel far and wide within Paraguay and overseas, telling the story of the recycling of instruments and the recycling of lives. The rock group Metallica even chose them as the opening act in its last

tour around Latin America. The orchestra has now received donations of new instruments; it also now has its own place to rehearse and receive music lessons. “But everything doesn't get resolved with a trip to Europe,” cautions Sánchez. He points out that the children's daily reality is much different from what they witnessed in Düsseldorf, Boston and Madrid. The changes Sánchez hopes to achieve in the children's lives are slow, one step at a time.

Even more than the craft of music, Sánchez hopes to impart to the children the concept of making an effort and of gaining perspective on their own lives, making their own decisions. Sometimes it is just enough to show alternatives for them to take initiative. Nevertheless, daily reality is not easy to confront. Thus, the project supports the families so that students can stay off the streets and continue their studies; sometimes, the project contributes to improving houses and providing materials and food. But more than material benefits, the project provides formation and respects their backgrounds, the realities of the difficulties of living in or around the dump.

Their everyday life is difficult, living in the middle of garbage. But in Cateura, garbage also signifies hope. The mountains of discarded trash have transformed themselves into opportunity in a little school. Dozens of children from the garbage dump are learning to see the world in a different way, and the world in turn is learning just what these children are capable of doing.

Rocío López Íñigo is an Erasmus Mundus MA Global Studies candidate from the EMGS Consortium who has lived and worked as a journalist in Argentina and Mexico, experiencing different Latin American realities.



Clockwise from top left: Favio Sánchez and Nicolás “Cola” Gómez; Tania has learned to play instruments made from recycled materials; Cola with his recycled instruments.