Waste picker social economy organizations addressing Sustainable Development Goals

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1. Introduction: Waste picker organizations and the social and solidarity economy

- Everyday challenges in waste management
- Waste pickers’ role in waste management
- Waste picker organizations and the social/solidarity economy
Drive social innovation, from an institutional, economic and social perspective.

Waste Picker Cooperatives

Create synergies between local authorities, private enterprises, state and citizens

Recognize and support values of: cooperation, sharing, reciprocity, autonomy, self-determination

Bottom-up, decentralization transfer of power, responsibility and deliberation to its members

Source: Based on Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005.
2. The work of waste pickers intersecting with SDGs

Waste & the SDGs
The work of waste pickers intersecting with SDGs: case study Brazil

• Research methodology
  • In-depth socio-economic survey with 21 waste picker organizations in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, in 2018
  • Interviews with the leaders of these 21 waste picker organizations
  • Questionnaire on social benefits from working in cooperatives applied to 10 waste pickers cooperatives

• Theoretical framework
  • Situated Urban Political Ecology (UPE) (Gandy, 2006; Lawhon et al., 2014; Rigg, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2004)
    • Critical social theory, post-colonial and global South lenses
Study region: metropolitan region of São Paulo
The work of waste pickers intersecting with SDG # 8: Productive employment and decent work

• SSE policies created favourable conditions for WPOs.
• WPOs generate productive employment and seek ‘decent work’ conditions addressing the 7 essential securities (ILO, 2002)
  • labour market security: e.g. National Waste Management legislation (PNRS);
  • employment security: e.g. seeking employment stability
  • job security: e.g. opportunities for career building
  • work security: e.g. occupational health measures
  • skill reproduction security: e.g. opportunities to gain and retain skills
  • income security: e.g. opportunity for income generation
  • representation security (representation through National Waste Pickers Movement or networks)
The work of waste pickers intersecting with SDG # 1: Eradicating extreme poverty

• There are 15–20 million informal waste workers worldwide
  • 3.8 million waste pickers in Latin America
  • 400,000 to 600,000 waste pickers in Brazil of which 38.6% are formalized in WPOs

• Poverty features of waste pickers in Brazil (IBGE, 2012a)
  • 66.1% Afro-descendant
  • 20.5% illiterate and 24.6% completed only basic education

• Income generation and poverty reduction with WPOs
  • While income varies from coop to coop more than half of the 21 cooperatives earned more than a minimum wage.
  • Opportunity to increase income with co-production in waste management.
The work of waste pickers intersecting with SDG # 5: Gender equality

• WPOs attracts more women than men.
  • Research confirms 63% of the total 747 waste pickers in the 21 WPOs are women and 12 WPOs had female leadership.

• The self-management (autogestão) of WPOs changes the relation with work which empowers particularly women.

• WPOs provide emotional support during challenging circumstances (single parenting, domestic violence, poverty, family hardship, etc.).

• WPOs expand the opportunities for women to empower themselves, (capacity development, life-long learning, expanding leadership skills and help other women).
The work of waste pickers intersecting with SDG # 11: Building better communities

- WPOs help with removal and the adequate disposal of waste, waste reduction, recycling and reuse.
- WPOs provide social support to members.
  - All 10 cooperatives surveyed confirmed that at least one or more members were or had been in a situation of extreme vulnerability, helping accommodate such situations.
- WPOs provide an environmental service to communities
  - “We perceive that there is less waste in the streets and less flooding have occurred since we carry out door-to-door collection”. (waste picker’s voice)
  - “There are many environmental assets involved in our work: benefits offered to the municipality by the cooperative, such as: social inclusion, ... strengthening / valuing self-esteem, contributing to the quality of life in the municipality and an increase in the life of the landfill”. (waste picker’s voice)
The work of waste pickers intersecting with SDG # 12: Changing consumption and production patterns

• WPOs address the goal of low-carbon, resource efficient, resilient and socially inclusive economy and of a society with greater social cohesion.
  • Diverting waste towards the circular economy, as waste pickers do in their everyday activity, reduces GHG emissions (King & Gutberlet, 2013).
  • Hence WPOs act as Clean Development Mechanism.
  • On average (based on 18 cooperatives) a WPO recovers and reinserts 130 tons of material into the circular economy.
3. Conclusion

• Focusing on waste opens new opportunities for achieving progress on some targets set under the SDGs for urban transitioning towards greater sustainability.

• Worldwide WPOs retrieve recyclable materials for reuse and industrial processing, following the logic of the Social and Solidarity Economy.

• WPOs everyday actions produce democratic spaces centered on solidarity and the care of others, seeking to reclaim citizenship.
• Governmental arrangements created for co-production in waste management calls for regular, long-term relationships where network and partnership arrangements are integrated in governance structures and legal policy frameworks.

• The research provides first insights of how WPOs address some SDGs, fighting poverty, improving working conditions, building better neighborhoods and contributing to climate change mitigation.

• The research demonstrates how the SSE has facilitated the organization and strengthening of waste picker cooperatives in Brazil.
• A key recommendation from this research to policy makers is the strive for participatory waste governance, inviting grassroots actors in waste management to the table to negotiate, plan and implement partnerships in waste management.

• An inclusive political agenda on waste management will provide opportunities to achieve the ILO proposed *seven essential securities*, necessary for decent work, intersecting several SDGs.

• The research suggests highest priority for policy makers to invite WPOs and into the debate of urgently addressing our waste problems and to establish fair contracts with these organizations remunerating the services they provide.
Thank you!

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