

GOLD VI

**Case-Based Contribution
to Chapter 7: Renaturing**
*GOLD VI Report on Pathways
to urban and territorial equality*

Building Resilience in Times

of Crisis: The Waste & Citizenship

Forum in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

In partnership with:

Produced by:



Building Resilience in Times of Crisis: The Waste & Citizenship Forum in Belo Horizonte, Brazil

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ORGANISATION NAME

WIEGO

CITIES/COUNTRIES IT COVERS

Belo Horizonte (Brazil)

CHAPTER

7: Renaturing

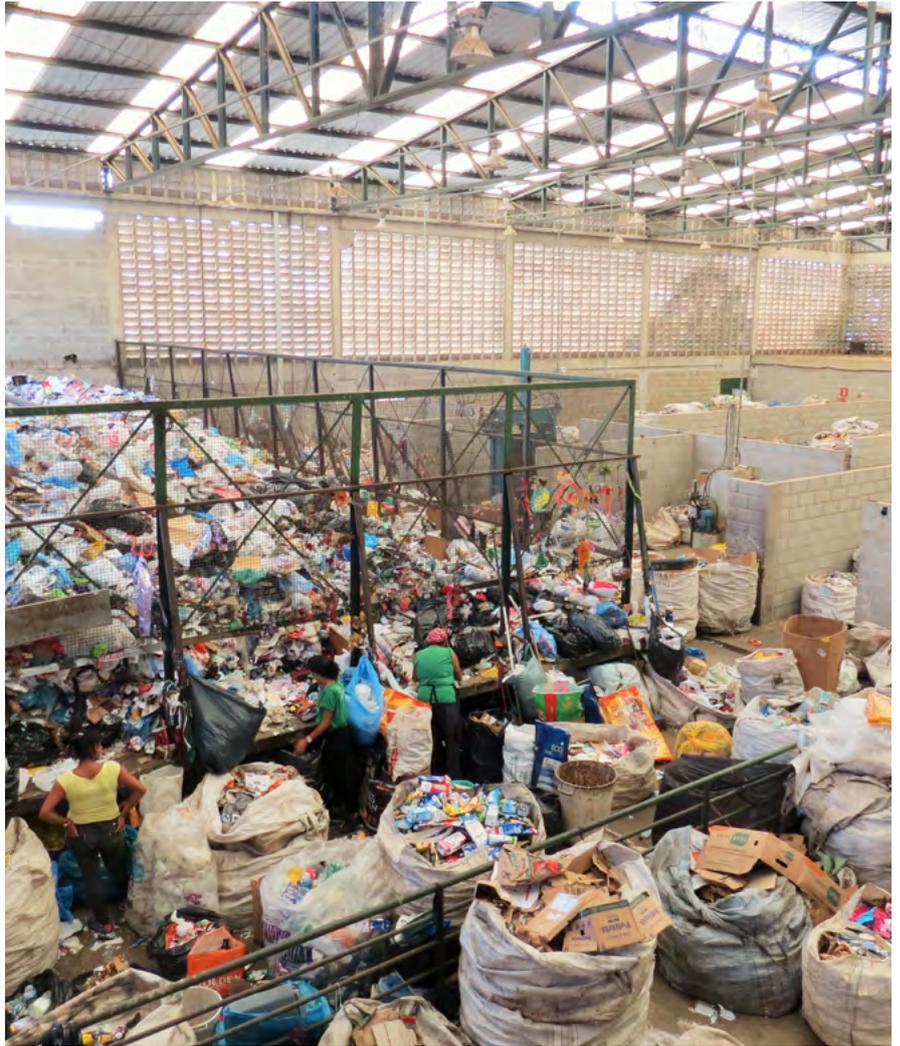
SUMMARY

There is growing interest in the potential of solid waste management (SWM) in contributing to greening urban infrastructure and systems. There are also several debates pointing to the potential that this may have on 'renaturing cities', while simultaneously supporting workers' livelihoods through the design of pro-poor SW systems. This article draws from an understanding of SWM as a socio-technical system that connects users to solid waste systems and is capable of addressing interrelated aspects and dynamics, including its technical dimensions, governance structures, environmental impacts, and social inclusion elements. It then reviews the experience of Belo Horizonte's (Brazil) Integrated and Sustainable Solid Waste Management approach to highlight the lessons of building synergies among key stakeholders through the integration of informal waste pickers in the city's solid waste management and establishment of a multi-stakeholder participatory forum - the Municipal Waste Citizenship Forum. This historical overview is the basis for reviewing the actions taken by all actors at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, the case study provides insights on the overall challenges and tangible possibilities for renaturing cities, particularly in the ways it can impede or promote infrastructural investments, more decent work conditions and an expansion of selective waste management in the city.

Introduction

Urban solid waste has historically been a neglected part of urban environmental management with conventional approaches to solid waste management systems focusing almost entirely on its technical-operational aspects. However, in the 1990s, a conceptual umbrella - **Integrated and Sustainable Solid Waste Management (ISWM)** - brought human and sustainable development into the picture. ISWM can be divided into two triangles. The first triangle represents three key elements related to ISWM's physical dimensions – public health, environmental protection, and resource management. The second triangle encompasses the governance strategies needed to deliver well-functioning systems, including the elements of inclusivity, financial sustainability, robust institutions, and policies.¹ Key stakeholders in waste management are both users and formal and informal service providers. Therefore, workers organizations, community-based organizations, NGOs, residents' associations amongst others need to be represented in the policy and governance processes.

Recent literature² shows there is growing interest in the potential of **solid waste management (SWM)** in contributing to greening urban infrastructure and systems. In addition, there are debates on the potential that this may have on 'renaturing cities', while simultaneously supporting workers' livelihoods through the design of pro-poor SW systems. Understanding SWM as a **socio-technical system** that connects users to solid waste systems also reveals the need to fully address several key and interrelated aspects, including its technical dimensions, governance structures, environmental impacts, and social inclusion elements. Documentation of existing experimentation on pro-



poor SW models has enabled some theorization on alternative scenarios for modernization that looks at how "inclusive recycling systems"³ can potentially move towards green systems that renature cities, while building and protecting workers' livelihoods in the process.

Belo Horizonte's Integrated and Sustainable Solid Waste Management reflects two key features in this direction. First, worker cooperatives are contracted out as service providers for collecting and sorting of recyclables. Since 1993, the municipal government signed a social accord with the then only existing waste picker cooperative - Asmare.⁴ Second, multi-stakeholder platforms play a key role in the planning, implementation, and moni-

Waste picker cooperative in Belo Horizonte (Brazil).
Source: Juliana Gonçalves

1. Scheinberg et al., 2010.

2. Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2020; ILO, 2013; King and Gutberlet, 2013.

3. Samson, 2020; Dias, 2016; Scheinberg, 2012. The term is used to denote systems that go beyond the conventional approach to waste management. In an inclusive system, livelihoods, universalization of services, and participatory governance are constitutive parts of SW systems. The degree of inclusivity of a system is context based (Dias, 2016).

4. The social accord included a monthly subsidy paid to Asmare which covered amongst other things rental of sorting centers, water and electricity supply, uniforms and PPEs. In 2000, new cooperatives were formed in the city and later integrated after the creation of the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum. See Dias et al., 2010 for details of Belo Horizonte's inclusive system.

toring of the recycling system. This case seeks to provide a brief overview of Belo Horizonte's **Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forum** history, how it has helped support the integration of informal waste pickers in the city's solid waste management system, and how multiple stakeholders have been central in guiding essential emergency actions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The latter illustrates the potential of the forum in terms of the **co-pro-**

duction of knowledge and actions among workers, the state and civil society. The case also considers the challenges regarding tangible possibilities for renaturing cities amidst growing local and national government austerity measures, political fragmentation and competing interests that impede infrastructural investments that can promote decent work conditions and expand selective waste management in the city.

1. Brief History of the Municipal Waste & Citizenship Forum: Centering Workers' Voices

Struggles for the recognition of waste pickers' contributions to local economies and the environment gained ground in the 1990s through the efforts to organize workers into cooperatives, particularly in cities such as São Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre. Concrete gains were made with the inclusion of waste picker cooperatives as partners in source segregation schemes of the latter two cities.⁵ The **National Waste and Citizenship Forum** (FNLC for its acronym in Portuguese) - a multistakeholder platform involving public, private and civil society representatives - was created in 1998 under the leadership of UNICEF Brazil which had an interest in child labor eradication and integration of waste pickers. Hence from its creation, the FNLC's goals were: the eradication of child labor, eradication of open dumps, the implementation of a sanitary landfill, the integration of waste pickers as service providers and the consolidation of a participatory approach to urban waste management).⁶ Since waste is managed at the local level, the FNLC also sought to promote the establishment of provincial and municipal waste and citizenship level forums.

Based on these strategies and given the long-standing tradition of progressive local politics, the city of Belo Horizonte and civil society organizations created the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum in 2003-2004.⁷ Some of the achievements of the Municipal Forum throughout the years include: the elaboration of a social and economic profile of waste pickers cooperatives in the early days of the forum; enabling recognition of new cooperatives formed during the 2000 economic downturn; the co-development of guidelines for municipal funding to other cooperatives; capacity building for waste pickers on management; and transitioning from social accords to proper commercial contracts to regulate service provision. In this sense, the Municipal Forum has played a role in **renaturing the city** particularly by redesigning the municipal selective waste collection, expanding the coverage of door to door recyclable collection and enabling contractual arrangements with more cooperatives in town.

5. Dias, 2020.

6. For an account of the FNLC's genesis and main achievements, see Dias, 2006.

7. S For an account of the genesis, dynamics and challenges of the Municipal Forum, see Dias, 2011.

It is worth noting that **discussions on alternative models of solid waste management and community based projects**, such as Zero Waste initiatives, have also emerged in the Forum. Civil society actors, who happen to participate in the Forum, have worked together on the Zero Waste Project⁸ in the Santa Tereza neighbourhood of Belo Horizonte for the past four years. The community based initiative includes services around food composting, a food coop system, a vegetable garden, a drop off site for recyclables, and campaigns for raising environmental awareness. These activities are ultimately foreground on supporting livelihoods and promoting environmental consciousness.



Waste picker cooperative in Belo Horizonte (Brazil).
Source: Bruno Greco

2. Driving Change through the COVID-19 Crisis

The Municipal Forum has not only supported **informal waste pickers' demands** for inclusive solid waste management policies, but has also drawn from important **alliances with technical experts, practitioners, academics and activists** outside the Forum to push for innovative solutions that can empower waste pickers.⁹ Studies¹⁰ that analyze the power dynamics and influence of actors within participatory spaces have pointed to how participation in other spaces beyond forums can strengthen the perception of certain civil society actors' influence, as well as inform their inputs to further advance specific agendas.

With the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, key actors, who participate in the Municipal Forum and other working groups and/or participatory spaces, quickly stepped into action to support the growing concerns of waste pickers facing the inability to return to work as a result of a municipal decree¹¹ that halted selective

waste collection activities for seven months. The municipality chose this course of action based on technical inputs and as precautionary measures to protect workers.¹²

As a result, the Forum created **two working groups**. The first was responsible for **organizing support networks** for waste pickers and facilitating connections for mutual aid. In some of the early meetings, representatives discussed the barriers both organized and non-organized waste pickers had in accessing relief and food baskets, what kind of fiscal exemptions during the pandemic would apply to cooperatives, how to systematize cooperative's fixed costs in order to verify possibilities for tax exemptions and how best to monitor the city council's bills that could apply to waste picker cooperatives. The second working group focused on **co-creating safety protocols** for waste pickers to use once selective collection activities could resume.

8. It is operated by the waste pickers cooperative Coopesol Leste, a collective of Rasta activists. It receives technical support from graduate students from the Federal University of Minas Gerais and other allies.

9. Building consensus and/or constructing the necessary technical arguments in networks outside participatory arrangements is a key strategy adopted by social actors as a way to influence policies. In Belo Horizonte, actors participating in the Municipal Forum rely on information and relationships from two networks: the Observatory for Inclusive Recycling - ORIS (comprised of NGOs such as INSEA, WIEGO, universities, second level coops and main leaders of the National Waste Pickers Movement - MNCR) and the Solidarity Economy Forum (comprised of many social enterprises such as home based workers groups, waste pickers coops, and NGO allies).

10. García and Bodin, 2019; Abers and Keck, 2009.

11. Decree n° 17.304/2020 from March 20, 2020.

12. Dias et al, 2020. Waste pickers are more susceptible to contamination since they collect, sort and/or process recyclable materials that have been handled by many others. Early studies during the pandemic pointed to the fact the virus could be found on surfaces and materials for up to 72 hours.

These working groups worked in tandem with the **Observatory for Inclusive Recycling** in the co-production of emergency relief measures and safety protocols for cooperative sorting centers. The combined efforts of these two groups led to two key outcomes: (1) the inclusion of cooperative members and non-organized waste pickers on the Municipal Secretary for Social Assistance's recipient list for food baskets and (2) a detailed operational manual with safety protocols for waste pickers.

The table below presents a key lesson for how multi stakeholders were able to shift the discourse and thinking on workers' health and safety during the pandemic.

While the change in discourse from local government actors within the Forum is noteworthy, there are still unique challenges regarding the capacity to effectively implement these demands.

While COVID-19 has brought attention to waste pickers' occupational health risks, there is anecdotal evidence that the amount of **medical and plastic waste** produced during the pandemic has increased dramatically. This in itself poses a threat to water streams and cities' capacities to effectively manage the health and economic crisis, particularly as it connects to an environmental crisis intensified by this mismanagement of waste.

Lesson	Outcomes	Challenges Ahead
<p>COVID-19 presented an opportunity to emphasize waste pickers' long-held demands for health and safety. As a result, workers and key allies recognized the need for workplace infrastructure and work processes in sorting centers beyond the issue of adopting individual personal protective equipment (PPE). Discourse shifted from placing emphasis only on an individual worker's responsibility for PPE.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift in emphasis from a sole focus on PPE to the importance of addressing collective protection equipment • Negotiations with Forum stakeholders and city government officials on how to address individual and collective protection in the short to longer term • More holistic approach to and discourse on decent work and occupational health and safety protocols for waste pickers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiating roles and responsibilities, including costs for installing collective protective equipment • Addressing needs of cooperative and non-organized waste pickers • Addressing the increase in medical and plastic waste during the pandemic



Waste picker cooperative in Belo Horizonte (Brazil).
Source: Juliana Gonçalves

3. Conclusion

Informal waste pickers have been increasingly recognized as part of the **green economy** debate¹³ since they have a small carbon footprint and are important players in climate change mitigations. The green jobs concept places an important emphasis on human development, well-being, quality employment, social inclusion and livelihoods. While these are relevant strengths in the approach, there is still a need for comparative research on how different organizational forms (associations/coops/micro enterprises/unions or self help groups) can strengthen initiatives and policies for greening urban systems. There is still a need for understanding which (if any) model or system is more favourable for a pro-poor formalization process of waste pickers, which is also capable of integrating both organized and non-organized workers too. Lastly, it is just as important to develop a system of (sustainability) indicators for monitoring and evaluation of green economy initiatives.

The trajectory of including waste pickers in the solid waste management system in Belo Horizonte illustrates the importance of a system that recognizes and **supports workers' rights through time**. Despite decades of support for organizing waste pickers, there are still only 15% of waste pickers who are organized in the city. The current challenge is how to align a green economy approach, which is at once **inclusive, pro-poor**, and represents the demands of **both organized and non-organized waste pickers**, with the need for expanding representation of these waste picker groups in important deliberation settings. In this respect, the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum is a strong case for how multi stakeholders have managed to **integrate the social and environmental dimensions into waste management**. Moreso, it reveals how actors circulating in multiple technical and activist spaces, who are also attentive to the complexities of urban inequality in Global South cities, can influence discussions on greening jobs and renaturing cities in participatory governance spaces and push for more inclusive and decent work practices for waste pickers.

13. See ILO Green jobs reports.

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This paper has been produced as a Case-Based Contribution to the sixth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VI): the flagship publication of the organized constituency of local and regional governments represented in United Cities and Local Governments. The GOLD VI report has been produced in partnership with the Development Planning Unit (University College London), through the programme Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW). GOLD VI focuses on how local and regional governments can address the local manifestations of growing inequalities and contribute to create “Pathways to urban and territorial equality”. The GOLD VI report has been produced through a large-scale international co-production process, bringing together over a hundred representatives of local and regional governments, academics and civil society organizations. This paper is an outcome of this process and is part of the *Pathways to Equality Cases Repository*, which collects the over 60 Case-Based Contributions produced as part of the GOLD VI report.

In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 7 on “Renaturing”, which focuses on the governance and planning of nature-based solutions, with specific emphasis on decoupling economic development and resource use, the transition to net zero carbon systems, risk reduction and urban resilience. The chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote approaches that advance these goals, placing the needs and priorities of structurally discriminated social groups at the core of their actions, and contribute to urban and territorial equality.

Supported by:



**Funded by
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This document has been financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida. Sida does not necessarily share the views expressed in this material. Responsibility for its content rests entirely with the authors.



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and Innovation**

This document was produced by UCLG and the “Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality” (KNOW) programme. KNOW is funded by UKRI through the Global Challenges Research Fund GROW Call, and led by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL. Grant Ref: ES/P011225/1