



## ASMARE: Informal Waste Workers Engaging in Municipal Policy-Making

**Highlights** ASMARE is an association of informal waste workers (*catadores*) in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. Founded in 1990, it was the first step of involving *catadores* as a part of the city's waste collection scheme. With ASMARE, the *catadores* moved from working in the streets with no organisation to semi-formality; able to voice their own demands. The change supported empowerment, improvements in working and living conditions, and greater self-esteem, which became foundations for later developments including a formal role in policymaking and ownership of recycling facilities.

### Introduction

Around the world quantities of waste have been increasing due to population growth, increased consumption, urbanisation, and packaging composition (UN-Habitat 2010). Where robust waste management systems are not in place, informal waste pickers are responsible for collecting and selling 50 to 100 per cent of all recycled waste (ibid). In some cases, there is no formal mechanism for solid waste recycling at all.

Risks to waste pickers are multiple and diverse, from exposure to hazardous materials, to injuries caused by lifting and moving heavy loads over long distances, to accidents, such as landslides and fires. These risks are compounded by the informality of the work: waste pickers often lack any protective equipment or social services and are excluded from formal municipal waste management schemes (UN-Habitat 2010). Further obstacles include low and inconsistent wages, social stigma and discrimination (Cooperatives Unit; Enterprises Department and International Labour Office



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(ILO) 2019). To respond to these challenges, waste pickers have organised into various cooperatives around the world, such as the Association of Collectors of Paper, Cardboard and Reusable Material (ASMARE) in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais State, is the third largest city in Brazil, with an estimated population of 6 million people (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2018). From 1960 to 1973, the city's waste was deposited in open dumpsites, which were frequented by informal waste collectors until the sites closed and a municipal sanitary landfill opened (Dias 2011). However, Belo Horizonte had a growing waste problem. By 1990, 0.2kg of waste was generated per capita, meaning 1,050 tons a day destined for landfills as no formal system for separating recyclables, organics and other forms of waste existed (Sabatino 2017).

At this time, the *catadores* had moved their work to the city streets, sorting through household and trade waste left on the side of the roads for collection and disposal in landfills (Dias 2011). The majority of *catadores* not only worked on the streets but lived on them too – either to protect their collected materials or because they lacked other options and were persecuted by the municipality as beggars and criminals (ibid). The NGO Pastoral de Rua, which worked with these street populations, recognised that there was an opportunity for *catadores* to organise, as they were already pressing for the recognition of their right to legally work collecting recyclables. In 1990, with the assistance of Pastoral de Rua, *catadores* founded ASMARE.

### Timeline

1960	1973	1990	1990	1993	2003	2014
City of Belo Horizonte begins to use an open landfill	Open landfill closes and <i>catadores</i> work continues but moves to the streets	ASMARE is founded with help from NGO Pastoral de Rua	Law gives <i>catadores</i> the right to collection and resale of recyclables	Formal agreement between ASMARE and the city of Belo Horizonte	Resolution to create job alternatives for <i>catadores</i> affected by dump upgrades	ASMARE officially contracted to manage waste during the FIFA World Cup

### How It Works

Recognising the need to address its growing waste problem and to involve existing informal workers already operating in the field, the Public Cleansing Agency (SLU) of the city took several steps to involve cooperatives of *catadores*. In 1990, a new clause was introduced to the city's constitution stating that all collection and sale of recyclables should be contracted through *catadores*, thus legalising their role in the system and protecting their activities.

Building on the decision to include *catadores*, the city organised conversations with ASMARE in 1993, through which ASMARE contributed to the city's new recycling program and assisted in its design. These consultations led to an integrated and mixed waste management system which included a formal partnership with ASMARE as the city's preferred service provider, as well as other features such as a drop-off scheme and new sorting centres (Sabatino 2017).

The agreement between ASMARE and the city included several key provisions from the city:

- A monthly stipend for administrative costs;
- Infrastructure for use by the *catadores*, such as containers and warehouses for sorting and storage;
- Vehicles for the collection of recyclables; and
- Education on the environment.

In the agreement, ASMARE was responsible for:

- Managing the recycling warehouses;
- Sorting and valuing recyclables; and
- Providing information on recycling production to the city.

ASMARE also provides administrative and management support to its associate members, who are *catadores*. Members bring their recyclables to the warehouse and receive a receipt based on the weight of the material that they collect. The material is then sorted and processed at the warehouse and sold. Profit from the sale of recyclables is shared amongst the members (Dias 2011).

### Enabling Participation

ASMARE is registered as a legal association and functions internally as a cooperative. ASMARE's associates (*catadores*) are employee-owners while their management representatives are also *catadores*. Furthermore, ASMARE and 22 other cooperatives have come together to form a network, *Cataunidos*. This collective of cooperatives further strengthens the negotiating ability of *catadores* in Belo Horizonte.

Cooperative representatives participate in the Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum, along with government officials, NGOs, and other stakeholders. The *catadores* used this forum in 2001 to organise a series of debates, seminars, and public hearings to discuss a proposed ban on *catadores* at the state's new and/or upgraded dumpsites. This intervention resulted in the state's adoption of a new resolution in 2003 requiring cities to create alternative jobs for waste pickers affected by dump closures and upgrades (Cooperatives Unit; Enterprises Department and International Labour Office (ILO) 2019).

In 2003, *Cataunidos* successfully petitioned the city to support the development of a plastics recycling plant, which it owns and operates. The plant is managed by three *catadores*, while a committee with representatives from different *catadores'* groups oversees the management.

### Outcomes

As a result of the efforts of Asmare and *Cataunidos*, *catadores* are now a formally recognised component of the waste management system, with a collective identity, greater self-esteem and better working and living conditions. A study in 2008 found that *catadores* in cooperatives on average earned US\$321 a month, 40 per cent higher than the national minimum wage of US\$228 (Sabatino 2017).

Furthermore, ASMARE's work with a local museum of knowledge to highlight their struggles for formal recognition and their positive environmental contribution gained public attention and as a result *catadores'* cooperatives were contracted by the state to manage waste during large events, such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup (Cooperatives Unit; Enterprises Department and International Labour Office (ILO) 2019). Other cooperatives in Rio de Janeiro, who are part of a National Movement of Waste Pickers, were contracted to manage waste at the 2016 Olympic Games (Cowie 2016).

From the perspective of the city, their partnership with ASMARE and their integrated waste plan resulted in 95 per cent coverage in terms of waste collection in Belo Horizonte, the disposal of 93 per cent of non-recyclable waste in environmentally safe landfills, improved public health and more secure livelihoods for a large sector of the informal economy.

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**Authors** Mariah Cannon, Jodie Thorpe and Silvia Emili

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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE UK  
 T +44 (0) 1273 606261 E [ids@ids.ac.uk](mailto:ids@ids.ac.uk) W [www.ids.ac.uk](http://www.ids.ac.uk)  
 W [www.eldis.org/collection/participation-economic-advancement](http://www.eldis.org/collection/participation-economic-advancement)  
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