

Learning and Summary Report from the Cities Alliance Exchange

“If there are no borders for those who exploit people, there should be no borders for those who struggle.”



Photo: Exchange participants at the offices of the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogota.

In August 2016, WIEGO and its local ally, Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (the Bogotá Waste Pickers Association or ARB), hosted a learning exchange visit in Bogota, Colombia between members and partners from the WIEGO network, Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI) and Avina. The exchange aimed to create an opportunity for the three organizations to share experiences with mobilization strategies, creating partnerships and the advocacy efforts and strategies of membership-based organization (MBO) leaders.

The Bogota visits represented the second half of a two-part learning exchange programme between WIEGO, SDI and Avina sponsored by Cities Alliance. SDI's national affiliate in South Africa facilitated the first exchange in Durban, South Africa where participants learned about the work and experiences of South African community leaders. The second half of the exchange provided a space for waste picker leaders from the South African Waste Picker Network (SAWPA) and Red Nacional de Recicladores de Ecuador (RENAREC) and community leaders, organizers and technical support professionals from Asiye eTafuleni, Avina and national affiliates of SDI from Bolivia, Brazil and South Africa to learn from the experiences of the ARB. This report summarizes the main exchange activities, reflections from participants on their learnings and plans of action going forward.

Looking back on the South African exchange, setting expectations for the Bogota exchange

The exchange kicked off with introductions - more than 20 community organizers, informal worker leaders and technical support individuals from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico and South Africa introduced themselves, their organizations and work. Participants from SDI and CORC then reflected on the first exchange in Durban where SDI shared their main tools and demonstrated their practical

application: savings, exchange programs, profiling, enumeration, and partnership. One of the key learnings from the first exchange for the Latin American waste pickers (from ARB and RENAREC) was the use of savings groups. Nohra Padilla of the ARB shared that they had already begun implementing savings groups in their organization:

“...the exchange [in South Africa] for us was very useful because we saw that all over the world there are people struggling for better working and living conditions. [...] Just a few days ago, we started [...] because we thought the example of savings that we saw in the South African communities was fundamental. Now that we will be able to have income, we need to start to save or to have other things to invest our incomes in. [...] In various regions of the country, we are starting small savings funds for other things...”

A second learning from the Durban exchange for the South African hosts from SDI was the potential to use waste picking as a livelihood strategy:

“One thing that was repeatedly said [during the first exchange] was the value of using opportunities around you: for example, the presence of waste. For us, that was a really big insight. I think many of the Latin American visitors were seeing waste and they were surprised that the opportunity was not being used. That was a big learning from us.” Yolande Hedler (SA SDI/CORC)



Photos: Exchange participants during the opening plenary. Clockwise from left: Elbia Pisuna (RENAREC) speaks while Maria Inés Vintimilla Carrasco (from a citizen’s advocacy network in Ecuador) looks on; 2) Emily Mohohlo of SDI South Africa makes an intervention; 3) Margothe Sabogal Ramirez (ARB) introduces herself; and 4) Felipe Toledo (Avina) introduces himself on the first day.

Participants then discussed their expectations for the Bogota exchange including their hope to learn more about: organizing and movement building at the national level, how waste pickers access government support, waste picking as a livelihood strategy and the experience of waste picker integration in Bogota:

- “What I’d like to learn from here is more about organizing, especially for recyclers [...]” - Patric Ndlovu (Asiye eTafuleni).
- “[...] we want something that can strengthen us and empower us. If we can learn more about recycling, we’ll use it as a strong income generation in our communities” - Emily Mohohlo (SA SDI).
- “Part of our expectations is to learn in terms of how other cities are integrating members of the informal sector, and in particular waste pickers” - Simon Mbata (SAWPA).
- “The South African participants [from SDI] wanted to learn specifically how do Latin American recyclers grow to a national movement and how did they manage to get government support” – Yolande Hedler (CORC/SA SDI).

Introducing the ARB – its history, struggles and experience

The Asociacion de Recicladores de Bogota (ARB) is a member-based organization established in 1990 which brings together 17 waste pickers associations and cooperatives across the city of Bogota. Through its member organizations, it represents over 2,000 of the city’s approximately 12,000 waste pickers¹.



Photo: Nohra Padilla of ARB presents the history and struggles of the organization

As a sector, waste pickers in Colombia have experienced countless historical struggles: forced evictions, murder, harassment by police and local authorities, and a series of laws and regulations imposed by successive governments in order to push waste pickers out of landfills, off the streets and out of the recycling industry. In response, the ARB has developed a multi-pronged strategy and operating model which aims to defend and improve the working conditions of organized and unorganized waste pickers in Bogota and across Colombia. Through its struggle, the ARB successfully advocated for an inclusive legal framework which now recognizes waste pickers as waste management service providers, recognizes them as a vulnerable group which must be protected and requires municipalities across Colombia to take affirmative actions towards including waste pickers as waste management service providers. In Bogota, this now means over 10200 waste pickers have received payment for their services since 2013.

¹Per an official census conducted in 2012, there are over 12,000 recognized waste pickers in Bogota.

The Table below summarizes components of the ARB's operating model:

Component of Operating Model	Description
1. Micro-routes for selective collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it is: Waste pickers pick recyclable waste from bags of garbage in public spaces or from private homes by going street to street. It promotes recognition of waste pickers by citizens as service providers - How it works: Waste pickers go from street to street with their truck picking up sorted recyclable waste from individual citizens
2. Macro-routes for selective collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it is: Waste pickers pick up larger quantities of materials from pre-established locations in the city. - How it works: Specific collection points in the city are identified where members can bring their sorted waste. The ARB truck passes by these locations, weighs the materials and transports the materials to each organization's warehouse.
3. Associates/ Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How it works: Associates/members who are not part of micro or macro-routes collect and transport their own sorted waste to one of the warehouses run by an ARB member organization or to the main warehouse. There, it is weighed, recorded, stored and preparing for resale.
4. Waste separation services for public & private institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it is: ARB acts as a professional service provider for separating recyclable waste for public and private institutions - How it works: ARB members collect the recyclable materials from the entity and provide their "client" with training on separating waste at source
5. Warehousing, storage, and separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it is: The ARB set up, runs, administers and sustains its own recycling centre. It is the main site where the organization sorts and stores recuperated recyclable waste. Several ARB members are certified to handle special waste (i.e. Puerta de Oro handles e-waste, ASODIG specializes in plastic and PET). - How it works: The waste collected from the micro and macro collection routes and by other ARB members and unorganized waste pickers is collected, sorted, prepared and stored in the recycling centre. Selling the accumulated materials collectively means waste pickers get better prices.
6. Organic waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it is: Food, scrap wood from trees and grass clippings are collected and organic manure is produced. - How it works: Through a pilot project, the ARB collects compostable waste around several parks in Bogota and manages several composting centres to produce compost.
7. Registration and weighing system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it is: a weighing system managed by the ARB which registers waste collected by each member in real time in a clear and transparent way. - How it works: waste collected through micro and macro routes or brought to ARB recycling centres is weighed and recorded in a template in real time. Information from the templates is recorded in an online system which forms the basis for the payment provided to workers for their services.
8. Organizational management and defense of waste pickers rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What it is: The ARB undertakes a variety of activities aimed at promoting waste picker integration, recognition and payment for waste pickers and their organizations as public service providers. - How it works: The ARB undertakes a variety of activities including regular trainings with leaders and organizations to improve their technical and administrative capacity, defense of waste picker rights through legal challenges and participation in drafting public policies, social mobilization and much more.

Find more information on the operating model in [this video](#)

The ARB Strategy:

Key elements of ARB's strategy are presented below with key quotes and learnings taken from a presentation done by ARB waste picker leader Nohra Padilla:

1) Strengthening the ARB and its member organizations:

To achieve structural change requires organization, and these organizations must have strong grassroots:

"...a labour union, a movement with false grassroots or weak grassroots is a movement which does not have the ability or a strong enough voice to be able to suggest policies or alternatives."

Representation of waste pickers at all levels in the ARB increases the legitimacy of policy proposals:

"We are an organization where waste picker leaders manage the union, operations, administration and are leading [our organization]. Our Board of Directors is composed only of waste pickers. Our assembly is made up of organizations of waste pickers."

"Decisions in our organizations are taken by waste pickers. Even though we have technical and professional support our governance structures are dominated by waste pickers. I think this is an important difference to have the position we have, to have the autonomy and independence necessary in these [negotiation and policy-making] processes and to have legitimate representation."

One of the first steps in organizing the sector is ensuring waste pickers recognize what they do as work. A key means of institutionalizing this in Colombia was by jointly developing labour competencies with National System for Learning for the waste picking trade:

"Certification in labour competencies has been very important because much of society's ignorance [about our profession] was because many waste pickers did not consider themselves to be workers or providers of a public service."

The formation of alliances with professionals has been essential to strengthen waste picker organizations, especially because Colombia's legal framework sets out difficult and complicated operational and administrative requirements for recycling centres:

"All of the [administrative and operational] capacities we have developed [over time]. The professionals that accompany us are extremely high quality. So we waste pickers may lack the knowledge but the technical professionals play a role and that is what makes our processes [run smoothly]."

2) Growth in the collection, production and commercialization of recyclable materials

Negotiating fixed sources of waste (i.e. universities, public institutions, etc) can help secure waste picker livelihoods:

"For us, fixed sources are very important because in the street, if I get there first, I take the material. But, if a comrade gets there first, the comrade takes the material. If we get to the garbage before it reaches the street, we are privileged."

3) Structuring and developing recycling centres to move up the value chain

A key accomplishment of the ARB has been setting up its own recycling centres including La Pensilvania and several others run by member organizations. The La Pensilvania recycling centre was set up in a strategic location following studies on established recycling routes. The centre is an official weighing point

(which forms part of the new city-wide payment scheme) where waste pickers – both ARB members and unorganized waste pickers – can bring their sorted recyclable materials to be weighed and recorded. Nohra shared several key learnings that came about from the process of setting up La Pensilvania:

Understanding the recycling value chain works is essential in negotiations:

“No organization can negotiate [...] with the government on the recycling system if they do not have the possibility to dominate the value chain. They don’t have the numbers to say what the price of cardboard is or how much it’s worth [...], it’s hard to engage with government and negotiations don’t work. You need to know the value chain, be part of the value chain and know in detail your trade.”

...and knowledge acquired as a result of running recycling centres has been essential to ARB’s negotiations for fair remuneration for waste pickers:

“[After setting up and running recycling centres], as an organization of waste pickers undertaking negotiations with the district government and national government, we had the ability to lay out the costs of waste collection and the amounts that waste pickers should be paid in the public waste management scheme. [This was] because we did the work of calculating how much a tonne of waste is worth, depending on the commercial structures and depending on the work tools. These types of structures what they give us is this: it gives us the possibility to have the knowledge to [create] proposals and [engage in] negotiations.”

4) Awareness raising and advocacy in public policies governing recycling and waste management

The ARB has engaged in a decades long fight for inclusion of waste pickers in Colombia’s solid waste management system. Their policy advocacy required a multipronged strategy: bringing legal challenges to the Constitutional Court combined with social mobilization and negotiations:

“We put ourselves to work not only by making all types of legal claims, and putting them into international contexts to create moral and social condemnation, but we also [mobilized] very quickly and did marches.”

“We have combined many forms of struggle: social mobilizations which are very important, defense of our work as an official job, the development of processes which position us as service providers and as natural allies to the community to help ensure materials are given to us, making the role of the work we do visible, and [highlighting] the impact that our work has. This has effectively permitted waste pickers in Bogota to achieve what our collective dreams define.”

Possessing knowledge of the specific value chain dynamics in Colombia has been essential in negotiations:

“Many governments bring in technical experts who – although they work in the sector – pretend they don’t know, saying that they’re innovative and want to invent 100 things when in other parts of the world they are already invented. In all of these situations, you need to contrast [what experts are saying...]. You can’t let them believe we are ignorant, that we’ve never picked up a kilo of waste, that we don’t know how the commercialization chain works, that we don’t know if certain [recyclable] materials are bought”

...and in these negotiations, using good practice examples of waste picker inclusion from other countries has been particularly useful:

“In Colombia, it gives us a lot of weight to be able to say that we are members of global and continental networks because we depend on the initiatives of other countries. When we talk about

the Law on Packaging/Bailing, we could reference what is done in Ecuador, in Brazil or in Chile. [...] When we make these types of knowledge contributions [...] the conversation changes [...].”

5) Visibility of the waste picker movement, monitoring and knowledge management

An additional factor highlighted by Nohra which has helped waste pickers gain visibility and recognition has been the use of uniforms by waste pickers. This promotes the idea that waste picking is officially “work”, helping the waste picker recognize him/herself as a worker and increases their visibility in society.

The ARB Strategy and Operating Model in Practice – Site Visits

Site visits helped participants understand how the ARB’s operating model works in practice. Participants visited points on the ARB’s macro-routes for selective collection (where waste pickers were sorting in a public park), warehousing, storage and separation of waste plus the registration and weighing system (at the La Pensilvania recycling centre), the work of ARB members (ASODIG and Asociacion de Recicladores – Puerta de Oro), and a pilot project to manage organic waste. The photos below show the practical learning gained by participants while the short stories summarize the site visits.



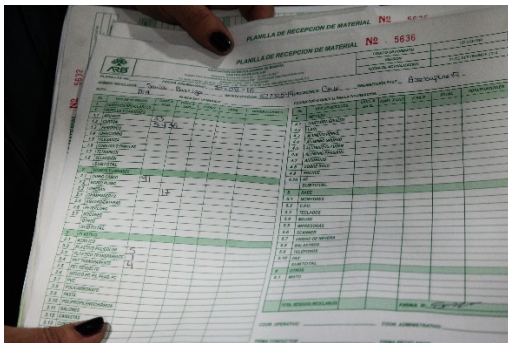
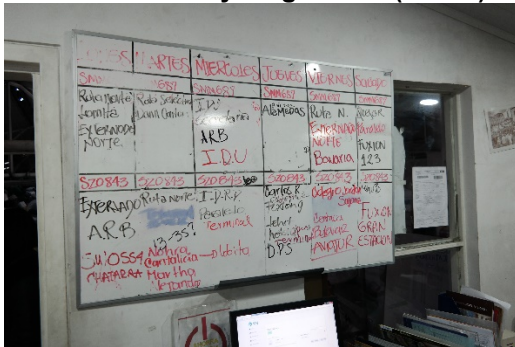
La Pensilvania Recycling Centre – Weighing, Recording, Sorting, Storing, and Preparing Materials for Resale

The La Pensilvania Recycling Centre is run by the ARB with an operations team of about 15 waste pickers who sort, prepare, weigh and record the received recyclable material and a 2-person rotating administrative team. In the centre, there are three modalities for receiving recyclable materials: micro routes of selective collection, macro-routes for selective collection and fixed sources (such as universities) who provide their unsorted recyclable materials to the ARB. There are recycling routes running Monday to Friday; morning, afternoon and night.

During the field visit, participants saw how waste is sorted once it reaches the recycling centre (right). They learned about the operational and administrative processes used by the ARB to manage its work (table below)



Schedules used by the ARB to organize micro and macro recycling routes (below)



The templates used for recording the type, weight and quantity of materials received by waste pickers (above)

How recyclable materials from the macro-recycling routes are received (below)



Information from the templates is recorded, tracked and inputted so that waste pickers are paid by the city payment scheme (above)

Macro Selective Collection Routes – Marisol and Alfredo

In a park in one of Bogota's rich neighbourhoods, Marisol and Alfredo sort waste they have collected. They are both members of an affiliate organization of the ARB and the park where they sort waste is a site which is part of the ARB's established mini-collection routes. On Tuesdays, Thursday and Saturdays, an ARB recycling truck comes around midnight to collect their materials (which must be sorted and properly packed and tied). The ARB members operating the truck will weigh and record Marisol and Alfredo's materials in a template (so that they can be paid later for the recycled material they have collected) and bring the waste to the ARB recycling centre.



Photos: Alfredo (left) and Marisol (right) transport and sort waste in a Bogota park

Before these routes were established, Marisol says that they started their informal collection route here and would walk all the way to the city centre to sell their materials (as there was no collection truck). As another waste picker leader explains, "Before, they came here, did their rounds and had to bring it to the centre." Though Marisol has been using this park to sort waste for over 20 years, she mentions that over the years, they've been harassed by the police, the municipality and even people in the neighbourhood. However, they continue to use the site, thanks in part to advocacy by the ARB that has helped promote recognition of the work waste pickers do and their contribution to a cleaner city.

Puerta de Oro – “Recycling of the Future”

The Association of Waste Pickers - Puerta de Oro was founded in March 1999 and currently has 117 members, over 80% of whom are women. The association was formed in response to the particular challenges experienced by women heads of household: balancing childcare needs, police harassment and sexual harassment. As the legal representative Nelly Vargas explains, “We made a decision to begin to organize and start to sensitize the women [waste pickers] that if they were organized, we could go to different sources to avoid being in the streets, that their kids could be in school or daycare.”



Photo: Nelly Vargas (legal representative at Puerta de Oro) discusses the organization

From the beginning, the association has specialized in recycling electronic waste. “Before, the community used to give us their recycling. Today, with the new legal framework, we had to study in SENA, skill ourselves up to have the opportunity to continue working as waste pickers,” says the floor manager Carlos. Nelly adds, “Decree 596 says that if you do not have a certificate of your labour competencies, you cannot exercise those competencies [...]. If you’ve done it all your life, you may have all the experience in the world but if you have not been certified, you cannot work.” Therefore, thanks to an agreement between SENA and the ARB, the waste pickers of Puerta de Oro began the certification process which took almost two years of training. When they finally had their certificate from SENA, it began to open doors for them. They were able to negotiate service provision agreements with major banks, constructions companies and call centres to manage their e-waste.

As two women members take apart computer hard drives, separating the mother board, the memory card, the processor, scrap metal, Nelly explains that 100% of the materials at their facility are recycled, “Here, nothing goes to the landfill.” All of the materials collected from their sources (banks, call centres, etc) are brought to the Association where members disassemble and separate the materials. The waste is then weighed, recorded in the municipal payment system and sold on up the recycling chain. The profits from the recycled materials are shared among Puerta de Oro members, with some money being kept to maintain the organization. They are also paid for their waste management services by the municipality as they are part of the payment scheme.



Photo: Members of Puerta de Oro demonstrate how to disassemble computer hard drives

For the members of Puerta de Oro, waste picking not only provides secure and dignified work, the association has also helped members improve their homes and connects members with access to social programs. This is because the organization’s mission is to improve the quality of life and housing of its members. The story of Luz is one example:

Luz is a twenty-nine-year-old mother of four. She is a third generation waste picker who was born on a landfill. She has been working as a waste picker for 18 years. Before joining Puerta de Oro, Luz was an itinerant waste picker, mostly collecting waste on the streets. When asked how her working conditions have changed now that she is a



Photo: Luz (right) and another member of Puerta de Oro

member of Puerta de Oro, she says, “They have changed a lot because on the streets you are fighting with police or with other waste pickers. Now it is not the same but before it was very difficult; everyone discriminated waste pickers. It was heavy because they thought we were addicts but in general no [that’s not the case].” Nelly goes on to tell us that as the legal representative, she ensures that members get the social benefits to which they are entitled. Luz’s children benefit from a grant called the Mercado de Integración Social which ensures her children are well-fed and has been connected to a program run by Salesianos Don Bosco which provides childcare and homework help to her children after school. She reflects, “Now that we are organized, we have a fixed work site, have our children in a stable place and we are not worried [...]”

Through organization and the labour certification process, five women members now have bought land where they have built their own homes while others were able to upgrade their homes. With the certification from SENA, members of Puerta de Oro can enter any work site to collect materials. Reflecting on their journey, Nelly says, “We do the exact same work that other [recycling] companies do. [...] I think in each city the same thing can be done and [waste pickers can] own the process and the market. If we look at the material, it’s the material of the future.”



Photo: Exchange participants with waste pickers at Puerta de Oro

Stories of Struggle and Organization: Asociación de Mujeres, el Reciclaje una opción Digna – ASODIG

The Asociación de Mujeres, el Reciclaje una opción Digna (ASODIG) is an association of waste pickers made up of women heads of households founded over 25 years ago in Bogota. During our visit to the association, one of the leaders Ana Isabel discussed the history and challenges faced by the association.

Over 30 years ago, Ana and several other waste picker families lived on occupied land in an industrial zone in Bogota called Puente Aranda. In a bid to “reclaim public spaces”, the mayor forcibly evicted Ana and the other waste picker families. As Ana explains, “The mayor met with the industrial zone and gave us 100,000 pesos each – the value of the lot. They put us in trucks – 5 families to a truck - and dropped us here.” With few belongings, Ana and the other families built humble homes made of wood planks and cardboard.



Photo: Ana Isabel of ASODIG explains the history and struggles of the organization

Though Villa comuneros neighbourhood, in the Bosa location is now part of the city of Bogota, 30 years ago it was mostly farmland with unpaved roads, making getting into the city to recycle very difficult. Ana and several other women started a daycare to help some of the mothers that travelled to Bogota to work. Despite their service, they were not paid for their work. So, Ana and 25 other women decided to form ASODIG, a waste picker association which also provides childcare services.

Over the years, ASODIG began reaching out to universities and NGOs for support, eventually connecting with the ARB. Through the ARB, waste pickers received training from the Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA) which in turn helped them gain contracts with institutions to help manage their recyclable waste. Through this process, they were contracted by the free trade zone, FONTIBON to sort and collect the organization’s recyclable waste. Thanks to this and other contracts, members of ASODIG made improvements and upgrades to their homes. Ana proudly explains, “Now we don’t live in the old cardboard houses, we have houses made of bricks [...]. We’ve improved the quality of life of our members.”

But, Ana and other members of ASODIG would be faced with another challenge: in 2008, the sons of the far-right ex-President of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe formed their own recycling company. In quick succession, the new recycling company began signing contracts to provide waste collection services to institutions around the city, robbing many waste pickers of their sources of materials. ASODIG’s contract with FONTIBON was taken away and given to the new recycling company without any apparent explanation.

ASODIG fought back against this injustice, eventually bringing the case to the Congress of the Republic. The media covered the case widely and members of ASODIG received death threats. Though they were unable to get back their contracts, the ARB supported ASODIG’s members during that time, giving them alternate work as drivers or asking them to sort waste from other sources. And, because of their unity, over time, they started to form new agreements with the Universidad Distrital and other residential zones to provide waste sorting and collection services. The Association which now specializes in managing plastic waste, has helped improve members’ quality of life, securing their place in the waste picking trade.

Managing Organic Waste in City Parks: A Pilot Project

La Florida is a regional park outside the city of Bogota with basketball courts, soccer fields, volleyball courts and other sporting facilities and campgrounds and picnic areas spread over an area over 260 hectares in size. Despite its size, the park did not receive any form of city waste management services, partly due to the fact that it sits within the zoning areas of several municipalities including the city of Bogota.

Ten years ago, the ARB began running the organic waste pilot project in the La Florida Park, through an associative agreement with the government. Through this agreement, the government agreed to provide the ARB with exclusive access to the materials in the park plus a small amount of funding while the ARB agreed to provide the equipment, labour and machines necessary to get the project off the ground.



Photo: Participants learn about composting

As Javier Borques (a waste picker working at the pilot project) explains, the park has garbage cans placed throughout it where people deposit different types of waste. The ARB has established collection routes in the park where members collect the material and bring it to the onsite organics facility for sorting. "Normally two people work [at the facility] during the week," says Borques, "From Tuesday to Saturday they do all of the waste separation from the bags [of waste] and on weekends they go around the whole park. Mondays are reserved for collecting the waste [to bring it to the La Pensilvania recycling centre] or organizing the facility, either in the composting room or the sorting room." Once they reach the park facility, they separate the recyclable, non-recyclable and organic materials. Then, the organic waste itself is separated (the compost does not use cooked food). The waste is divided into large piles which weigh about 700kg and a bacteria called *bocache* (a mix which includes sawdust and rice husks) is added to accelerate the decomposition of the organic waste. The piles are covered in plastic tarps and twice a week, ARB members mix the pile of waste. As they decompose, leachate gases are removed and reinjected when necessary to control the temperature and facilitate decomposition. After 4-6 months, the piles of compost have shrunk in size, dried out and are ready to be ground down and packaged. The ARB makes between 1-1.5 tonnes of organic material per month through the park's waste. The compost is then used by farms, ranches, nurseries and as fertilizer for trees in the park itself.



Photos: Food waste (left) which is later separated into piles of compost (right)

When discussing the project's impact so far, Jorge says, "We decrease the amount of recyclable waste going to the landfill, we decrease the amount of organic waste which is thrown out." Waste pickers are also able to sell the recyclable materials they salvage from the park's waste and are paid as part of Bogota's waste pickers payment scheme. The model is currently being replicated by the Association in six other parks around Bogota.

Key Learnings:

On the final day, participants reflected on key learnings from the exchange. Listed below are some of the key learnings highlighted by participants:

Learnings about Organizations:

1) The first step to waste picker inclusion in waste management is recognition by waste pickers themselves that they are workers who are contributing to society:

“Recognition must start with the organization itself and the waste picker him/herself, recognizing what their work is and the importance that their work has in the value chain. And later, having that recognition from authorities so that that recognition is truly applicable for oneself and within society” Felipe Rosario (RedLacre)



Photo: Felipe Rosario of RedLacre

“One thing we saw that you guys do here is the value of recognition and growing a strong identity as waste pickers and I think this is something we can really learn from and it was interesting to me that developing a uniform and a safety kit and training and procedures plays a very big part in growing this recognition.” Yolande Hedler (SA SDI)

2) In creating strong organizations, it is essential that the grassroots/base levels of the organization are strong:

“I want to highlight a bit about the importance of the grassroots. [...] If the grassroots are not strong, you can never have an effective movement like what we have achieved here in Colombia” Dainer (Cooperativa de Recicladores Renacer Santamarta, Colombia)



Photo: Dainer of Cooperativa de Recicladores Renacer (an ARB partner) speaks during the plenary

“I have picked three main important elements that you are using so that you can face the tough challenges. The first one: a strong base. If you’ve got a strong base, whether the challenges come, you will stay strong if the base is strong. If the base is weak, everything can happen. Some of us will quit. But because of the strong base, you are still standing. Some of us lose our beloved ones, some of us are not with us today, they didn’t survive in that struggle. For that I salute you. The second one: unity. When going around, I see the unity among all of the waste pickers. [...] The other thing that I picked up is love. That you are loving what you are doing. If you love your job, someone can come and try to destroy you but because of that love in your heart, nothing can happen.” Emily (SA SDI)

“...the prestige of poor organizations like ours is achieved through struggle, transparency, work, the work not only by leaders but also by the workers in the organization” Nohra Padilla (ARB)

3) Strong organizations also ensure that knowledge is not concentrated with just a few leaders, it is shared to ensure new leaders are formed:

“One of the commitments we have when there is an important activity is that we inform ourselves and with that information, we don’t just fatten ourselves with the information from the training, we need to disseminate it and by multipliers. The idea is to disseminate the information [...] by trainers of trainers. The obligation is not just to be a leader but to also train other leaders within our organizations” Dainer (Cooperativa de Recicladores Renacer Santamarta)

4) While strong organizations and grassroots are important, when advocating for policy change, the ARB emphasizes that changes should benefit the whole sector:

“It’s not the same to represent [only the interests of] 200 or 300 waste pickers in your organization... we think it’s important to demand better work and life conditions for waste pickers everywhere [organized or unorganized]” Nohra Padilla (ARB)

“One of the highlights I picked up was when they were presenting about being associated with ARB and those recyclers not associated with ARB but then [...] these people were working together [despite some being organized and others unorganized].” Patience (SDI)



Photo: Patience of SA SDI reflects on her learnings at the plenary

5) To legitimately represent their interests, organizations of waste pickers must be run by and for waste pickers:

“Decisions in our organizations are taken by waste pickers. Even though we have technical and professional support our governance structures our dominated by waste pickers. I think this is an important difference to have the position we have, to have the autonomy and independence necessary in these [negotiation and policy-making] processes and to have legitimate representation.” Nohra Padilla (ARB)

Learnings about advocacy strategies:

1) Using rights-based language can be a useful tool when advocating for waste picker inclusion:

“...in Colombia we aren’t recycling because it’s environmentally sustainable or because the landfills or dumps or sanitary landfills have collapsed. In Colombia, we recycle and we have to begin to recycle because waste pickers demanded their rights and effectively that was the model that was imposed.” Federico Parra (WIEGO)

“It’s important to talk about access but also about rights, which, for me is a very important lesson. [...] Access to collection [of waste] but also the right to continue in the [waste picker] trade” Maria Eugenia Torrico (SDI Bolivia)

2)and being able to draw upon knowledge, learnings and inspirations from other waste picker organizations can be essential in movement building:

“The exchange of experiences is extremely important. There, we can see the values that our comrades have at the global level – that they are unafraid, that they are strong. One can see how they fight and how waste pickers can be included” Elbia Pisuna (RENAREC)

“In Colombia, it gives us a lot of weight to be able to say that we are members of global and continental networks because we depend on the initiatives of other countries. When we talk about the Law on Packaging/Bailing, we could reference what is done in Ecuador, in Brazil or in Chile. [...] When we make these types of knowledge contributions [...] the conversation changes [...]” Nohra Padilla (ARB)

3) Building alliances with other grassroots movements can also strengthen policy positions:

“We should not just focus on the activity of recycling but also look to way to change the model and that requires work in a variety of different aspects. Waste pickers in Ecuador need to build linkages with the indigenous movement, the labour movement, with the women’s movement because the majority of waste pickers are women, with youth and with many other actors to gain strength, gain presence, gain power” Felipe Rosario (RedLacre)

4) In engaging in policy advocacy and building organizations, there can be setbacks and progress takes a long time:

“We have seen here that there is a lot of power when people come together. What we’ve seen as well is that the ARB has not grown overnight and it has been a really, really long process.” Yolande Hedler (SA SDI)

“...this victory, this achievement [of waste picker inclusion] didn’t come cheap. It was fought for, lives were lost but having achieved so much you’re [ARB] not resting on your laurels, you’re still fighting.” Patric Ndlovu (Asiye eTafuleni)



Photo: Patric Ndlovu of Asiye eTafuleni makes an intervention

Learnings on the Role of Waste Pickers

1) Recycling contributes to city economies and represents and economic opportunity:

“My message to other recyclers is that we have to work hard and be proud of the work that we do and the contribution that we make to the economies of our different cities and countries.” Maria Ntibaleng Vilakazi (Asiye eTafuleni/SAWPA)

“Going back home after the site visits, I have come to realize that litter is not as what I used to look at it. From now on, I see litter as a financial and economic opportunity to upgrade her home and educate her children.” Margaret Nomali Zondo (SDI)

2) Government can play important role in improving WP livelihoods:

“What really inspired me and what inspired us it to see that government can actually pay recyclers. I don’t know if this is an idea that we have considered back home and it is an amazing goal to strive for.” Yolande Hedler (SA SDI)

Follow-up and Action Items:

Share information learned during the exchange with their organizations and authorities in their cities:

- *“I will say that coming here as an NGO and leader representing people and informal workers in South Africa, going back we’re not only going to impart the knowledge that we gained from here to the workers only but to the decision makers as well.”* Patric Ndlovu (Asiye eTafuleni)
- *“What I’ve learned having been to various sites and I saw how recycling is done in Bogota, I will take it back and introduce it to my fellow workers in Durban.”* Maria Ntibaleng Vilakazi (Asiye eTafuleni/SAWPA)
- *“This is not my first time to go places like this one but this one has opened my eyes to teach some other women when I go back home.”* (Cynthia Nkosi, SAWPA)

Implement recycling as a livelihood strategy:

- *“Where to start? I’m not going to start with someone. I must start with myself because I learned from you that first – love what you are doing. When you meet another one [waste picker], form a strong partnership. I feel like, I’m going back home...I’ll be the star of this. I’m not going to take it to someone and say, do this, you will survive. No. I’m going to do and then the others will join me.”* Emily Mohohlo (SDI)
- *“We didn’t value that garbage can generate income because we thought that people that live in the street were the only people who recycle. Here people [making a living from it], everyone recycles and I learned about recycling. There [in Bolivia] with my organization, we are going to start to recycle”* Emiliana Mamani Vali (SDI Bolivia)

Working together in South Africa and beyond:

- *“I think that going back home, we need to strengthen or build relationships with these organizations and NGOs because it won’t be easy to influence the government alone. If we work as a unity, our voice will be heard better by our government”* Margaret Nomali Zondo (SA SDI)
- *“We cannot as SDI influence government to change housing upgrading policies alone. We need other sectors, we need other organizations, we need other grassroots who have the same issues as we have so that we’re able to change the government mindset. You mentioned working at Habitat 3, working together, we have issues which lead us. I might be coming from a housing upgrading sector, you might be from recycling but all of these are linked. All of us need security of tenure, we need services. For others, they need livelihoods, they need job creation so all of this is linked together. If we go out there with one voice, we will be able to change the policies.”* Patience Samukelisiwe Phewa (SA SDI)