



## NOHRA PADILLA

*Colombia*

2013 GOLDMAN ENVIRONMENTAL PRIZE RECIPIENT  
FOR SOUTH & CENTRAL AMERICA

Unfazed by powerful political opponents and a pervasive culture of violence, Nohra Padilla organized Colombia's marginalized waste pickers into unions and made recycling a legitimate part of urban waste management.

### **Background**

With urban growth outpacing the capacity of municipal dumps, waste management is a major problem in Bogotá and throughout the continent. Compostable garbage buried in landfills release powerful greenhouse gases, while recyclables left in dumps keep materials out of the recycling stream, increasing the need to extract more raw material.

The growing volume of recycling that does happen in Bogotá is carried out by a group of marginalized people known as "waste pickers." In the face of blatant discrimination, safety and health hazards, and poor wages and working conditions, they provide a much-needed service to the city while scraping together a living for their families.

### **Motivation**

Nohra Padilla has been recycling with her family since she was 7. Her family fled violence-plagued rural Colombia and moved to Bogotá, where going through trash piles in the city gave the family of 12 children a way to survive.

When Padilla was 16, a local dump that had become a key source of scrap material—and livelihood—for informal recyclers in her community was shut down. This forced them to face the challenge of looking for recyclables in the streets. Landfills posed numerous health risks and hazards, but they were a relatively safe place for recyclers to sort through trash in peace, away from the discrimination and violence in the streets, and with a guarantee that they'd find enough recyclables to get through the day.

Given her experience picking waste on the street when her family first moved to the city, Padilla naturally progressed to a leadership position among the recyclers, who organized into cooperatives that provided a measure of safety and protection in the streets. She gradually rose through their ranks, and began to see a clear need to fight for recyclers' basic rights to continue their work—and with it, the dignity and recognition for the service they contribute to the city.

### **Impact**

Thanks to Padilla's leadership, the cooperatives have grown into the Association of Recyclers of Bogotá (ARB), an organization that represents the city's 3,000 informal recyclers, and the National Association of Recyclers in Colombia (ANR), with 12,000 members strong. Together, Padilla and the recyclers are revolutionizing the waste management infrastructure in Colombia.

A landmark victory came in late 2011, when Padilla won a court ruling that now prohibits waste management contracts that don't provide job opportunities for informal recyclers. It was a much-needed affirmation of their fundamental right to work and the government's acknowledgment of the necessity and benefits of recycling.

Recyclers are now formally recognized stakeholders in Bogotá's waste management planning. They go to work wearing uniforms and identification cards that acknowledge their profession. ARB operates two recycling centers, with plans to expand operations to what will be the largest recycling center run by informal recyclers in Latin America.

Padilla's achievements come in spite of Colombia's pervasive culture of violence and powerful economic interests who do not want recyclers to cut into their profits from landfill contracts. As her successes have grown, so have slanderous accusations and physical threats to her safety. The risks Padilla faces escalated to the point where she had to request state protection, which was denied.

In a victory that catapults Bogotá to the frontline of cities with sustainable waste management policies, the mayor issued a decree that mandates recycling in the city. It also says recyclers are to be paid for their services—a huge departure from a system where the sale of recycled material is their only source of income, a first in Bogotá—and establishes routes that allow recyclers to sort through material before waste is taken to landfills. Padilla is leading negotiations with the city's public utilities department on a new waste management contract for recyclers, paving new frontiers for the rest of Colombia and other countries in Latin America grappling with waste management.

### About the Goldman Environmental Prize

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# 2013 Recipient for South & Central America: Q&A with Nohra Padilla



**Q. What was it like growing up as a recycler in Colombia, and how did you become a leader in the fight to transform the system?**

A. I was 7 years old when my mother started taking us with her into the streets and to the dump to search through trash piles for recyclables as a way to earn money. My family had been displaced because of the violence in Colombia and needed a way to survive in Bogotá, and this was a way for us all to be together while we worked. The working conditions at the dump were bad, and we would spend our days covered in garbage surrounded by rats and cockroaches. But nobody bothered us there, so it was peaceful and we were happy. When I was 16 they closed the dump where we and many other families worked, so we were all forced to start looking through trash in the streets. But many people didn't want us in their neighborhoods because we were dirty and poor, and they would chase us away, attack us and call the police. We had to form cooperatives to protect ourselves and continue recycling, and I became a de facto leader because I had worked in the streets before and wasn't afraid, unlike most of the others. As I grew older I took on more and more responsibility, and our organization grew larger and stronger.

**Q. What have been your goals throughout this struggle and what do you view as your greatest achievements?**

A. Our original goal was to improve the working and living conditions for recyclers and to protect our rights to continue recycling. We wanted legislation that would recognize and formalize our work so that we wouldn't be vulnerable to the police and other social persecution. We needed the population to understand the environmental impact of recycling – that our work benefits not just us but the entire country. The

government has since accepted the necessity of recycling and Bogotá is now required to implement a recycling system that will preserve the natural resources of our country. Now other cities in the country are being asked to strengthen their recycling programs as well. We have transformed the image of recyclers and won the acceptance of society, and Colombia is now the first and only country in Latin America where recyclers have constitutional protection to continue their work.

**Q. Where have you found the greatest opposition to your work?**

A. Our biggest opponents have been the private waste management companies, which have a lot of money and political power and view us as competition. I've been threatened, and my computer and important identification documents have been stolen. In Colombia, there is a history of removing leaders who work for the people and are fighting for change by throwing them in jail. I was locked up for eight days in an attempt to discredit my name and association. The government recently made a decision to give the recycling contracts to the thousands of recyclers in the city instead of the private companies and so the companies are resentful, and some have gangs that carry out their business by force – so I still feel my safety is at risk.

**Q. What's next in your fight?**

A. In the immediate future, we're working on getting a recycling center up and running that would be owned and operated by recyclers. We had been renting a center that was the property of the district, but it's important to us that we have our own place to help us move toward complete independence. In the long term, I want to take our message to the rest of Latin America and the world to help other countries that have not been able to achieve what we have. Colombia is now considered the continental leader in organizing and developing legal strategies for recyclers, and we want to use our position to help in places where recyclers still work in very inhumane conditions. Our ultimate goal is for recyclers to be universally respected and seen as part of a productive and beneficial process in their country and society as a whole.

