

## Colombia's Triumphant Recicladores

On March 21, 2013, a jubilant cry went out from the crowd as two informal waste pickers withdrew from an automated banking machine the first historic payments for their recycling services. The event took place in Bogotá, Colombia, where the Mayor's Office launched a system to compensate those whose work has, for so long, gone unrecognized.

Traditionally informal waste pickers, known as *recicladores* in Colombia, earned income based on what they could get in private sales for the recyclables they collected. Now, after a two-decade struggle, *recicladores* will also be paid as public service providers. Per ton payments for materials collected and transported will almost match those paid to private operators. The first 790 waste pickers and their families to benefit saw their normal earnings double or even triple. About 4,000 (of Bogotá's 14,000) waste pickers are registered for the payment programme.

### Nohra Padilla's Story

Nohra is a third generation waste picker. As a schoolgirl, she worked alongside her very poor family collecting recyclables at the Bogotá municipal dump in the early morning hours before classes began. After finishing secondary school, with no money for further education and a lack of other employment options, Nohra entered the recycling profession full time. Then in the early 1980s, the municipality threatened to close the dump on which she and hundreds of others made their living, and an activist was born.



*At age 7, Nohra began waste picking at a Bogota dump. In 2013, she was awarded the world's largest prize for grassroots environmental activism. Photo courtesy of Goldman Environmental Prize*

The waste pickers organized to fight for the right to keep recycling. They lost the battle to keep that dump open, though the municipality offered some financial help to the cooperatives so they could continue their collection work in the streets. On the streets, however, the recyclers faced police harassment and public contempt and were sometimes threatened, or worse.

In 1990, Nohra was part of a group that created the *Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá* (ARB) to represent the city's informal recyclers, who now number about 3,000. Smart and determined, Nohra rose through the ranks. She took the helm as ARB's Executive Director more than a decade ago. Along with her husband Silvio—also a recycler and activist—she has worked tirelessly to help waste pickers achieve respect as workers and to gain recognition for the services they provide to their communities.

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Such a triumph seemed far off in 2011, when the city of Bogotá announced a \$1.7 billion (US) public bidding system that would take the role of recycling away from the waste pickers who had been doing it for more than 60 years and hand it instead to private companies. The *Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá* (ARB)—a network of *recicladores'* organizations—and its allies filed a lawsuit to protect workers' rights. Since 2003, the Constitutional Court of Colombia has issued several judgments that recognize waste pickers as subjects of special protection.

In December 2011, the Constitutional Court struck down the public bidding process, but gave the ARB just three months to present a concrete proposal on how waste pickers should be integrated into the municipal system. WIEGO and other allies worked closely with ARB and the Waste Pickers Trade Union Pact to formulate a technical, operational, economic, political and social proposal that included the entire waste picking community. After months of negotiation, the *recicladores* formally became part of the city's waste management system.

Now they are recognized and being paid for the valuable services they provide in their community. However, to be sustainable the inclusive model requires adjustment, so ARB and close allies like WIEGO continue negotiating with the current administration. Another challenge will be to ensure that the thousands of other *recicladores* in Bogotá and throughout Colombia are included in a fair payment system.

### WIEGO's Role in this Story

WIEGO has partnered for years with waste picker organizations in Colombia, providing direct support to help arm them to challenge government. In 2011, when the issues around privatizing Bogotá's waste system were growing, WIEGO funded a \$50,000 (US) study, conducted by Geosigma under the guidance of ARB and WIEGO, to determine just what value the *recicladores* could realistically place on the collection of a ton of materials.

The evidence-based model produced by Geosigma has been a cornerstone in ongoing negotiations with the city. (While most immediately used in Bogotá, the model has wider applications in Latin America).

WIEGO's team—and especially both the Global and the Latin American Coordinators for the Waste Picker Programme—have lent considerable expertise and strategic knowledge drawn from around the world to the waste picker organizations in Bogotá over the past several years

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“Becoming organized is a difficult process. In every country in the world, waste pickers have been invisible,” Nohra says. “This situation only changes when we begin to organize.”

In 2006, Nohra received a scholarship and could finally attend university. But as she neared completion of her degree in Public Management, the threat of privatization through the city's proposed bidding system put her burgeoning skills to the test.

At a global waste pickers' strategy meeting in April 2012, privatization of waste came to the fore as the biggest threat facing informal recyclers.

“Access to waste is the key aspect—if we lose it, we lose our work,” Nohra told waste pickers from around the world who had gathered in India to chart their survival. “We need to articulate ways in which the municipal solid waste management system and the informal recycling sector can be interrelated.”

She knew this battleground firsthand. As ARB's leader, it was Nohra who spearheaded the Constitutional Court challenge in Bogotá that saw waste pickers defeat the city's attempt to privatize waste—and then led another battle to ensure the *recicladores* were fully included in the Bogotá's waste management system. Now Nohra is leading negotiations with the city's public utilities department on a new waste management contract for recyclers.

For her tireless efforts on behalf of her colleagues, and her championing of their environmental service in diverting waste away from landfills and into recycling facilities, Nohra was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Award in San Francisco on April 15, 2013. It's the world's largest prize for grassroots environmental activism.

In her acceptance speech, Nohra thanked the Mayor of Bogotá and his advisors for agreeing for the first time ever to pay the informal recyclers—a recognition of them as legitimate workers in the city's sanitation program. She also thanked the Constitutional Court of Colombia and its judges, “who now understand that the law,” she said, “can change the world.”

**Meet other informal workers and learn about their lives:  
[wiego.org/informaleconomy/workerstories](http://wiego.org/informaleconomy/workerstories)**

(and in turn have learned a great deal from the struggles in Colombia). In early 2012, following the Constitutional Court ruling that gave waste pickers a short timeframe in which to develop a strategy for their inclusion in Bogotá's formal solid waste management system, WIEGO supported ARB's technical team in drafting their proposal. WIEGO's Operations Manager went to Colombia to ensure ARB's organizational and financial systems were sufficiently developed. He also attended meetings with city officials to offer outside validation and assist with the negotiations. WIEGO also funded the development of a route map for door-to-door collection, directly facilitating the creation of a concrete proposal. As well, leaders from organizations within the ARB network were given training and information to help build their capacity.

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*Waste pickers without access to waste  
are like farmers without land or fisherman  
without fish—we just can't survive!*

~Silvio Ruiz Grisales Coordinador Gremial  
de la Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá

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In 2013, WIEGO produced videos that depict how the *recicladores* in Bogotá fought and won their battle for inclusion. These short videos are being disseminated throughout Colombia and the world to serve as educational material and to inspire other waste pickers. To view, visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).

## A Growing Global Phenomenon

Bogotá is just one of many locations where WIEGO is partnering with waste picker organizations in their struggles to gain recognition as workers who provide social, economic and environmental services to their communities.

For example in Pune, India, SWaCH is a cooperative affiliated with and born out of the struggles of KKP KP, a trade union of waste pickers. Through a contract with the Pune Municipal Corporation, more than 2,300 SWaCH members provide door-to-door waste collection to over 360,000 homes in the city. They are paid through resident user fees, and are accountable to the residents they serve as well as the municipality. KKP KP is a partner with WIEGO in the Inclusive Cities Project, and has received significant support through this partnership.

In Brazil, about 600 cooperative members of the National Waste Pickers Movement (MNCR) provide jobs to more than 80,000 waste pickers (*catadores*) and are responsible for collecting the vast majority of recycled in the country. In 2012, the MNCR succeeded in getting *catadores* compensated from public funds for their environmental services.