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God is My Alarm Clock

A Brazilian Waste Picker's Story

by **Deia de Brito**¹

Dona Maria Brás was a tireless force in helping Brazilian waste pickers overcome persecution and gain respect and security as members of cooperative ventures.



Photo: S. Dias

Dona Maria Brás catches the bus up the road so she can arrive for her 7 a.m. shift at the ASMARE waste pickers' collective, where she's worked for two decades. After stepping off the second bus, she stops to greet a street vendor who makes her a fresh papaya smoothie.

This morning, like every morning, Dona Maria Brás wakes up a little after 5 a.m. without an alarm clock. The sky is dark and the light bulbs in her house are dim. "God is my alarm clock," says the toothless woman with dark skin and long braids as she dips a dry white roll in sugary black coffee. She fills a metal container with a lunch of beans and rice for a long day at work. She feeds a few leftover food scraps to a family of pups that waits outside the kitchen door. The 65-year-old mother had nine children of her own but likes to say that everyone is her child. Over the years, she's adopted others and raised them as her own.

The sun begins to rise on Belo Horizonte, Brazil's third largest metropolis. A mountainous city in the southeastern part of the country, it is traditionally known as the processing center for the region's mining industry, for which the state was given its name *Minas Gerais*, or General Mines.

On weekdays, the downtown storefronts and street vendors feed off the chaotic movement on the cobblestone sidewalks, and every Sunday, a well-known street bazaar known as the *feira hippie*, or hippy fair, closes down a central downtown boulevard. In recent years, the vendors have shifted from selling artisanal products of regional stones, metal and wood to cheap jewelry and plastic knick-knacks imported from China. It's a change that's happened all over Brazil, as the country has become one of the largest consumer economies in the world.

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Belo Horizonte. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

¹ Deia de Brito is a journalist who lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. She recently graduated from the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. She grew up in California, Massachusetts, and Brazil. This is a modified version of a piece first published in the December 2011 issue of the *New Internationalist*.



The ASMARE waste pickers' collective. Photo: L. Tuttle

The collective is located on *Avenida do Contorno*, a thoroughfare whose name in Portuguese means “to surround” because the street forms a circle around the central part of Belo Horizonte. In some parts of its loop, the street runs through upper middle-class residential neighborhoods lined with boutiques and looming condominiums, one famous for having been designed by the formidable modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer.

But where the avenue circles the edge of downtown, close to the city’s main bus depot and warehouses, the street has a grittier feel. Here, it runs parallel above the murky Arrudas River, where a few brave street dwellers store their possessions on its dangerously thin ledges only accessible by feats of climbing. It is in this area, near downtown’s bustling commercial district, where recycling depots have set up shop and where most of the city’s waste pickers have historically collected recyclables during the day and slept next to their pushcarts at night.

Dona Maria Brás walks a few blocks and waits for the green light at *Avenida do Contorno*. To her left, there’s a recycling depot of the traditional kind – not a waste picker-run collective but one like the recycling centers in the United States, where people take their recyclables to sell and get paid on the spot.

Waste pickers arrive at this depot with makeshift carts and wheelbarrows and gather in chaotic lines on the sidewalk to weigh their day’s goods for which they typically receive about fifteen Reais, or eight dollars, in exchange. Some have limps, others missing teeth, scars. A few days earlier, a homeless waste picker warned of these kinds of places, saying they are full of rowdy men, drunkenness, and crazy people. But there are good people, too, he said.

From the crosswalk where she waits, the sign is visible just across the street. Painted in large, block letters on a slab of concrete wall, standing against the wispy summer clouds: ASMARE.

Inside, her co-workers, wearing blue shirts with the collective's name, hurriedly push wooden carts – handmade in their on-site workshop – several times their size and overflowing with paper and plastic through the entrance.

Dona Maria Brás knows these depots well but she is on her way to a different place. From the crosswalk where she waits, the sign is visible just across the street. Painted in large, block letters on a slab of concrete wall, standing against the wispy summer clouds: *ASMARE*. It's an acronym that stands for the *Association of Paper, Cardboard, and Recyclable Materials* – one of the first waste pickers' collectives ever formed in Brazil.

Inside, her co-workers, wearing blue shirts with the collective's name, hurriedly push wooden carts – handmade in their on-site workshop – several times their size and overflowing with paper and plastic through the entrance. Others sort through heaps of materials piled on the concrete floor. A girl no older than four, wearing braids and bows, walks by, holding a toothbrush in one hand and hanging onto an older woman's finger with the other. A tired looking teenaged worker sits slouched on an upright barrel, his bare-feet dangling. The scene is not so different from the one across the street – *ASMARE*'s waste pickers were once independent waste pickers like the ones lining up at the recycling depot.

But the difference is huge. As a collective, they have their own warehouse space to work out of and they sell what they collect as a group. They still go out in the streets and gather cans and bottles and plastics on a daily basis, but they bring them back to the warehouse to sell in bulk for better prices than they would alone. At *ASMARE*'s sister warehouse only a few blocks away and at other collectives in the city, municipal recycling trucks empty loads of material collected from street-side pick up onto the warehouses' floors in loud, chaotic, and dusty operations. The waste pickers are constantly sorting their way through never-ending piles, like Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the hill.



One of Dona Maria's co-workers at *ASMARE* pulls a laden cart. Photo: D. Tsoutouras

Waste pickers in Brazil have been around for more than half a century but it wasn't until 1990, with the formation of ASMARE, that they first started to organize. Since then, waste pickers across the country have developed formal agreements with cities and towns, establishing themselves as the official providers of recycling services in hundreds of municipalities. In the past seven years, in Belo Horizonte alone, eight new collectives have sprung up. Across Brazil, there are now an estimated 500, according to the national waste pickers' movement – and the number is growing.

As the sun warms the city and the morning shift begins, the ASMARE workers offer each other bread and coffee from their thermoses. A few form a circle around a pile of paper on the ground. Some grab empty boxes and paint buckets to sit on as they bend over and begin sorting. As more members arrive, the circle grows and soon, there are about ten people, their hands collectively reaching into the center of the pile for the best material. The workers playfully tease each other as they sort. A few of them are romantically involved, some are mothers and daughters or sons, and others are siblings.

Waste pickers like Dona Maria Brás are proud of the fact that they belong to collectives and played a role in an expanding movement. She and others were part of what Fátima Abreu – a former government official who did outreach with waste pickers in the early 1990s – called a “revolutionary experiment.” But many waste pickers who were part of that experiment feel like it's not enough.

Right now, the city partially pays for their rent and utilities. The workers must compete for government and private grants in order to purchase better equipment; much of their current equipment is falling apart and affects their productivity. And productivity means everything, as what they make depends on what they sell. But so do the prices. The money they earn from selling recyclables to middlemen doesn't provide a reliable source of income, as the prices of raw materials are in constant flux. Their long-time goal is to be treated as other city employees and get contracts, with benefits, for the public service they provide.

Yet most say that the experience of joining a collective has improved their lives. Some have gone from homelessness and illiteracy to taking on leadership roles that have given them the chance to speak at conferences around the world. They wield a kind of power that was unheard of two decades ago.

“Many years ago, the waste pickers were invisible, even to sociologists,” said Sonia Dias, a sociologist who invented the term *lixologa*, or *garbologist* – someone who is an expert in the study of garbage – to describe her profession.

“Back then, nobody talked about waste pickers,” she said, referring to the days before ASMARE. “When engineers thought about it, it was just the technical and administrative aspects – waste was waste.”

Like many people who work closely with waste pickers, much of the art adorning Dias' home is made from recycled materials by waste pickers: a map of Africa made of strips of soda cans, a table made in ASMARE's carpentry workshop, a paper-mâché Buddha. Dias frequents ASMARE's downtown bar

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and restaurant – the Reciclo 1 and 2 – where members work as cooks and servers and their art, made from recycled materials, is available for sale all over the walls. The venues are popular spots where locals watch samba bands.

In 1973, the city shut down its open dump after a landslide there killed dozens of waste pickers who worked and lived off of it. The city built a sanitary landfill in its place. The waste pickers who had worked in the dump were barred from working at the new landfill so many began collecting recyclables in the city streets. The government didn't like the growth of waste pickers in its streets, Dias said.

But with a change in the city government came the "revolutionary experiment." With the help of nuns from the Catholic Archdiocese and other advocates who recognized that drug abuse, homelessness, and mental illness often went hand in hand with the profession, the city signed an agreement with the activist pickers in 1993. It would pay rent and electricity on the waste pickers' very own warehouse space. Around the same time, the city amended its constitution to say that collectives should be given priority for the collection of recyclables. ASMARE began with 20 members. Today, it has nearly 300.

In the past decade, the government of Belo Horizonte helped start eight new waste picker collectives. In 2003, it called for the unemployed, and especially single mothers, to sign up for work at the new collectives. People who had never touched recyclables in their lives suddenly turned to sorting recyclables at the new collectives. The door-to-door collection trucks began picking up recyclables from 30 neighborhoods in the city and dropping them off at the collectives, where workers would sort them.



Plastic gets melted down to make pellets. Photo: L. Tuttle

While the number of collectives in the city multiplied, ASMARE continued to grow. The original collective allied itself with other collectives across the state, forming a network called *Cataunidos*, or “waste pickers united.” Rather than selling their recyclables individually, the nine collectives started selling in even larger quantities, combining their material so that they could sell at higher prices to bigger buyers. The *Cataunidos* network then opened, in an underdeveloped neighborhood in Belo Horizonte, the first waste picker-run plastic factory in all of Latin America, where workers melt down the plastic that arrives from the collectives and turn it into little pellets to sell to manufacturers. The goal – not yet achieved – is to eventually close the production loop by manufacturing hoses and buckets from the plastic pellets.



In the afternoon, ASMARE becomes unusually quiet, except for a skinny dog that growls at strangers and the constant scuttle of rats across piles of unsorted waste. Most of the workers are congregated at the far end of the warehouse in the meeting room. Inside, voices rise, expletives fly. The debate is over white paper. The waste pickers have just gotten news that the company that buys their white paper is threatening to drop the price from five cents a pound because, the company claims, it’s arriving full of staples, glue, and other binding materials. There are no machines to separate these intricate parts from the whole – only rough human hands that prefer not to use gloves because that way they can feel the materials more intimately.

The rise and fall of prices is an ongoing battle for waste pickers whether independent – those who sell their goods to middlemen at recycling centers – or collectivized. But for the latter, whose main goal has been to improve their economic conditions, the relentless fluctuation in their earnings is perhaps more ironic.

The collectives have elevated the waste pickers to the frontline of social struggles in Brazil and brought the promise of dignity and stability to those who once worked and slept in the streets under the threat of police harassment. Former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in his eight years in the post, made waste pickers one of his priorities, signing laws and coming up with financing for the collectives, and low-income housing and education for the workers and their families.

And yet even the waste pickers who belong to collectives have little financial stability. Brazil miraculously skirted the global economic crisis – unemployment stayed low and people consumed more than ever – but the waste pickers went down with the rest of the world. Even among informal workers, they suffered the sharpest economic decline, according to “No Cushion to Fall Back On: The Global Economic Crisis and Informal Workers” a study by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). The mountains of plastic, aluminum, and paper continued to grow but the prices of raw material kept falling and so did the waste pickers’ salaries.

After the crisis, the prices rose back up slowly and the waste pickers, who had seen a boom in their sector before it went bust, were still grappling with the aftermath of that scare. There were no controls or supports to cushion the blow if prices were to plummet that low again.

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Dona Maria Brás is one of the founding members of ASMARE. “A foundational rock that can’t leave until I die,” she calls herself. Her name is the only one visibly spray-painted in a kind of tribute in large letters across one of the blue warehouse walls.

A few workers walk in and out of the room, agitated. But Dona Maria Brás stays out of the discussion, quietly keeping to herself in a small closet inside of a large room filled to the brim with mountains of unsorted paper.

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By the end of the meeting, she emerges from her hiding place with the news that her back is sore. She has worked most of her shift already, sorting through recyclables for about ten hours under the warehouse’s corrugated roof. The rest of her workday entails pushing an enormous cart through the streets and picking up recycled materials at designated business and residential pick up spots – a task that she says is easier than it looks.

“Carrying the weight of the cart is not that difficult,” she says. “It’s about learning the technique to manage the weight.” Thus, her back isn’t hurting from lugging her cart up and down the steep streets but from sorting, a task that requires bending over for hours on end. Dona Maria Brás asks one of her co-workers to take over the rest of her shift so she can go home a couple of hours early.

Twenty years ago, going home every day was a luxury Dona Maria Brás did not have, she says as she gathers her belongings. She slept, like many independent waste pickers, in a homeless encampment on the avenue, under an overpass. Taking a pushcart home on the bus everyday was impossible. The cart didn’t fit through the door and there was no safe place to leave it at night. It made more sense to stay in the streets, where she could sleep near her cart, and sell her goods to the small recycling centers that weighed and paid on the spot during the week. In the encampment, she and her neighbours would make beds of cardboard, light a fire, and drink liquor to be able to face the next day.

Dona Maria Brás sits on a bucket as she waits for her partner – a tall, slender, handsome man with dark skin named José Carlos – better known as *Fumaça*, or smoke – who also works at ASMARE. More like companions than boyfriend



Living on the street allowed Dona Maria to sleep near her pushcart. Photo: S. Dias

and girlfriend, she says, the two met in the early days of ASMARE. At that time, Dona Maria Brás had already been working as an independent picker for 12 years. Her first husband died of cancer and she left her second husband many years ago. As a single mother, she struggled to take care of her children.

“If I were to work in a closed environment, I would have to pay someone to watch the kids,” she says. It was a service she couldn’t afford. So a friend convinced her to take up selling recyclables.

It’s a certain kind of person that ends up working as a waste picker, many of them say. It’s often people who have tried other jobs, jobs in which they’ve had bosses and haven’t been able to follow orders. They are often people who can’t work in an office, people who are fiercely independent. Some are drug addicts or alcoholics. Others, like Dona Maria Brás, come from poor, uneducated families and find that picking waste is a dignified way to feed their children.

“I know a way for you to take care of your kids and you won’t be without your kids and you’ll be able to raise them,” Dona Maria Brás remembers her friend telling her in the mid-1970s. “Come to the street with me. I work with recyclable materials. I’ll teach you.”

When the children were still young, Dona Maria Brás brought them with her to work and sleep alongside her in the streets. Eventually, with the help of a Catholic charity, she was able to buy a lot in a distant neighborhood, and build a house, though she continued to live in the encampment and work as a waste picker. When her oldest children reached adolescence, she left them at the house during the week. On the weekends, she stored her cart at the recycling center where she sold her goods, and took the bus home so she could be with her children. For Dona Maria Brás, the street turned out to be welcoming and the people who lived in her encampment were helpful. “When one suffered, everyone came together to help out. Moral support was collective,” she says. But society didn’t offer the same protections.

The middlemen to whom waste pickers sold the recyclable materials they collected paid them little. At the end of the year, Dona Maria Brás recalls, the only thing the waste pickers could take home was a bottle of bad wine or sugar cane liquor. “We weren’t seen as workers, as human beings,” she says. “We were persecuted by all levels of government.”

Tensions escalated when Dona Maria Brás and other waste pickers took over an abandoned downtown lot. They began to use it as their base of operations, bringing their recyclables there to sort, and sleeping there at night. The city government tried to kick them out. Some recall police officers spraying the waste pickers and their materials with hoses. Then members of a Catholic charity organization began showing up. They would drive around in a van and pick up street dwellers and take them to shelters, Dona Maria Brás recalls. “Then they started discovering the suffering of waste pickers.”

At first, Dona Maria Brás and her colleagues were skeptical about the good intentions of the nuns and social workers who had stepped in to help. “At that time, we were really scared and rebellious,” she says. “When we saw someone coming with nice clothes and a clipboard, we thought they were someone from the city government coming to fine us and take our stuff. We would grab knives or a stick.”

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As the waste pickers disperse throughout the warehouse and into the streets, Dona Maria Brás and a handful of workers gather in a circle. A worker, angry about the threat against the price of white paper, suggests that everyone arrive at seven the next morning to clean up the white paper. “Are you guys going to come in early tomorrow morning?” she asks the tense faces gathered around. Several workers reluctantly nod their heads.

“We need to do that to show them that we tried,” Dona Maria Brás says. The idea is that everyone will work harder to get rid of the excess material and so persuade the buyer not to drop the price of the white paper.

A stocky, brown-skinned man with a jump in his step and wearing no shirt walks by, carrying two huge plastic waste bags. “I’m not doing anything about that paper,” he says. “We don’t have anything to do with the drop in the price. It’s corruption. They’re keeping everyone stressed out and working too hard. It’s not worth it.”

A young woman in her early twenties with the face and body of a skinny teenager, but who is herself a mother, rolls her eyes as the man walks off. “There are a few rotten fruits around here,” she says. She quickly covers her mouth with both hands like a child struck with guilt for saying too much.

The woman organizing the clean up session, too anxious to wait until the morning, begins sorting through a large bag full of white paper. The buyer said there was too much glue in the material so she rips apart entire books to peel off the binding. There are notebooks with plastic covers and photographs. She pulls the paper from the non-paper. After a while, the fingers start to hurt from so much pulling and grabbing. Hands become sprinkled with small paper cuts. Blood mixes with dirt and oil. Waste dust fills your nostrils and stings your eyes. Sorting is a job that’s often done by the women in waste picker cooperatives, as many prefer the steady and meticulous work to the pushing or pulling of a heavy cart or the strenuous job of crushing plastics – which become extremely heavy when they are compacted – in the machine. Some women even say it’s like therapy because it gets their mind off their difficult home lives and all of their responsibilities.

Dona Maria Brás is ready to go, so she goes into the shower room – an end of the day custom – and washes herself. Inside the locker room, women’s loud laughter echoes as they giddily get ready to leave work. Dona Maria Brás emerges wearing a modest clean shirt and green pants and carrying a plastic bag full of her soiled clothes. Other workers come from the showers clad in makeup and high heels – unrecognizable as they exit toward the downtown streets.



Before they leave ASMARE, Dona Maria Brás and Fumaça pick up a box of beans that has been donated to the collective. As they are preparing to step out the gate, a rat skitters across the concrete. Fumaça kicks it, scoops it into a box, and as he crosses Avenida do Contorno, drops it in the Arrudas River and watches it flow east.

On the route home there are car and motorcycle repair shops, electronic stores, tire stores, evangelical churches and bars with drunks who sit in plastic chairs drinking cheap beer in the cool evening breeze. The sun sets over the stop-and-go traffic of buses and large trucks, transforming the smoke-stained sky into the

beautiful horizon for which the city was given its name. Dona Maria Brás sleeps, her head rolls back on the hard plastic seat. There is still another bus to go.

“On January 9, better speed and economy for those that ride the bus in the Barreiro neighborhood,” reads a poster inside the bus, referring to a new kind of bus transfer for those who live in that distant neighborhood. Many people who can’t afford to live downtown commute to work, often taking two to three buses and paying for each one. Barreiro is one of the farthest neighborhoods, and Dona Maria Brás and Fumaça make the journey every day. Luckily, as members of the ASMARE collective, the two receive free bus passes as part of their benefits.

When the bus stops, the two cross the street and enter the depot where they will catch the next one. The first bus that arrives is too packed for Dona Maria Brás, who says she can’t stand because of the pain in her back, and so the couple stands in the line, marked by a rope, for the next one. The last bus leaves the couple only a short walk from their house. It has taken them nearly two hours to arrive. But before coming home, Fumaça mutters that he is going to stop at the store. She asks him to bring back a liter of soda. “He’s going to drink cachaça,” Dona Maria Brás says, referring to Brazilian sugarcane alcohol.

She steps up to the gate of her house. “Don’t judge us. We are poor,” she says.

She sets her things down and begins pulling out pots filled with already made beans and rice that she cooks on the weekends because there is little time to cook during the week. Most days, she and Fumaça arrive home around 10:00 at night. They wake up at 5:30 in the morning.

Sitting on the couch, Dona Maria Brás slices tomatoes and onions and pours white vinegar and salt over them. Then she fries up hunks of spam and turns on the television. By the time she turns the burners off, Fumaça is staggering into the kitchen carrying the soda Dona Maria Brás asked for. She urges him to fill his plate. “You know I’m not a good eater,” he says. “What he’s good at is drinking,” she says. Nonetheless, Fumaça makes himself a small plate and sits down.

“This is a poor peoples’ house,” Fumaça says. “But we are going to get our apartment soon.” He is on the waiting list for President Lula’s *Bolsa Moradia*, the federal housing program for those with a low-income. They want to live in a better place. Here, black mould blankets the walls, windows and ceilings and the electricity goes out often, like on this night. Flakes of paint, covered in mould, fall off the ceiling onto the bed. The air is noticeably thick and difficult to breathe.

Fumaça is still energized and while he eats his dinner, he recalls the time he went to São Paulo with hundreds of other waste pickers from around the world to an international conference. He remembers taking notes about biogas technology, the gas that is extracted from the methane and carbon dioxide produced at the landfill. He learned about the growing movement against incineration, a process that threatens the waste pickers’ livelihoods and puts pollutants in the air.

Fumaça watches Big Brother, a reality TV show, dubbed into Portuguese, in which the show’s stars live together in isolation from the outside world, and are constantly watched by cameras. He changes the channel to a soap opera about a woman paralyzed from the waist down. The man who loves her must defend his passion for his now wheelchair-bound girlfriend in the face of his

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“She was a leader whose happy singing echoes in my mind, whose strength and willingness to struggle alongside her fellow waste pickers inspired many. When I think of the joy she showed in the many waste pickers’ carnival parades we danced in together, I am reminded that the fight of waste pickers for recognition builds on citizenship for all of us.”

– Sonia Dias

mother, an overly protective woman concerned with the family’s high social status. A little before midnight, Dona Maria Brás, still wearing her clothes, falls asleep on a mattress on the floor.

Dona Maria Brás said about her work at ASMARE: “I am a foundational rock here. I won’t leave until I die.” Her words proved to be true. Unexpectedly, in March of this year, after she and Fumaça had moved into their new apartment, Dona Maria Brás died of a heart attack.

On the morning of her funeral service, the waste pickers of ASMARE gathered at the warehouse. They had organized and paid for two buses and a van to pick them up and take them to Dona Maria Brás neighborhood church. Four cars, filled with family and friends, followed the procession. “People were really emotional,” said Luiz Henrique da Silva, a waste picker. “She was one of the founders and strongest supporters of ASMARE.”

Godoy, the president of ASMARE and a waste picker, said the warehouse stopped on the day of her death and the day of her funeral service. “It was a hard day losing her. Nobody was expecting this to happen,” said Godoy in a phone interview. “But these are the things of life. We will continue to do what Dona Maria did. She had a history of fighting.”

Dona Maria Brás’ children continue to work at ASMARE. Fumaça, while still grappling with alcoholism, is receiving counseling. A crucial part of working in a waste pickers’ collective means supporting other members in their times of need or crisis. Members have contributed money to Maria Brás’ family and brought psychologists to the warehouse to counsel the family members she left behind.



Dona Maria Brás (right) with her son. Photo: S. Dias

About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO draws its membership from membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy. For more information see www.wiego.org.