

Percepção de catadores de resíduos de uma associação localizada na região Seridó/RN sobre as condições adversas de trabalho: uma análise do sujeito coletivo

Perceptions of waste pickers in an association located in Seridó/RN about the adverse working conditions: an analysis of the collective subject

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Resumo

Este trabalho objetiva estudar a percepção de catadores de resíduos sólidos quanto seu trabalho numa Associação de coleta seletiva localizada na região do Seridó/RN. O estudo consta de uma pesquisa em duas frentes de análise: de natureza quantitativa, usando a técnica de observação direta extensiva e intensiva e, posteriormente, qualitativa, centrada no Discurso do Sujeito Coletivo e Observação Participante. Para o levantamento dos dados, foi aplicado um questionário com os catadores e realizado às suas atividades conjuntamente com os mesmos, a fim de compreender o processo de trabalho e acompanhar o exercício da atividade de catador. Foi declarado pelos entrevistados que o motivo de trabalhar com coleta seletiva é não ficar desempregado. Quanto à satisfação, os catadores disseram que é receber a renda no final do mês. A maior dificuldade relatada é o baixo rendimento oportunizado pela associação, bem como a insalubridade da atividade e o preconceito. Quanto ao futuro, a maioria afirmou que permanecer na associação está condicionado ao aumento do provento mensal. Por fim, mesmo com alguns avanços legais e a renda oportunizada pelas Associações, há um longo caminho a ser percorrido no sentido de criar mecanismos para garantir trabalho digno, inclusão socioeconômica e qualidade de vida.

Palavras-chave: Associação; Catadores; Inclusão; Renda

Abstract

This paper presents a study of the perceptions members of a waste picker association have regarding their recycling work in the Seridó region of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil. The study followed two lines of investigation: one uses quantitative data collected from waste picker responses to survey questions and an extensive, intensive direct observation technique; the other uses qualitative data derived from researcher observations and discourses with the subjects. Direct observation was employed to better understand the association's operational process and the waste pickers' work related routine. Interviewees stated that their main reason to work as waste pickers in the association is that they want to be employed. Regarding their job satisfaction, they said that their fulfillment is linked with their monthly income. The major problems reported were low income, unhealthy working conditions, and society's preconceptions. In respect to their future plans, the majority affirmed that they will continue working with the association but conditioned this response on increased earnings. Finally, although laws have been developed that codify their profession and the income shared by the association has improved their status and security, there is still a long road to travel before mechanisms are in place to guarantee them decent jobs, socioeconomic inclusion and an improved quality of life.

Keywords: Association; Waste Pickers; Inclusion; Income

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, economic expansion that followed the industrial revolution has been enhanced by globalization, technological development, and the spread of large-scale production facilities. While this activity has promoted a significant increase in global macroeconomic indicators that generally benefit the world's population, the expansion has also had deleterious side effects, one of which is that it has contributed to unprecedented environmental degradation that exceeds bearable limits (SEIFFERT, 2009; GOUVEIA, 2012). According to Pereira and Teixeira (2011), the progress that was experienced after the industrial revolution is unsustainable and has had perceptible negative consequences, such as pollution of the aquatic ecosystem, degradation of air quality due the burning of fossil fuels, and accumulation of excessive waste. Recognizing these negative effects, the main environmental institutes and their researchers began to intensely debate these problems.

In 1972, the first big international meeting addressing environmental issues was held in Stockholm, Sweden. By the end of the 20th century, the sustainable development debate had gained value throughout the world (SEIFFERT, 2009). As an example of the increasing importance of sustainable development, the Brazilian government's Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) advocated the development of policies and programs prioritizing the recycling of disposable materials and treatment of environmentally detrimental residues to mitigate the damaging effects of exacerbated production (IPEA, 2013).

In terms of solid waste, Brazil has been found to be a potential polluter. According to data collected by the Brazilian Association of Public Cleaning and Special Waste Companies (ABRELPE), in 2016 the country generated 214,405 tons of urban solid waste daily, with a coverage index of approximately 91.2 percent. The country's Northeast region, the focus region for this study, was responsible for 43,355 tons (22%) of this total. Only 58.4 percent of the solid waste produced in Brazil was found to have a proper destination, while the remainder (41.6%) was thrown into designated but unregulated landfills or open dumps, an occurrence in 59.8 percent of the country's municipalities. In total, 29,660,995 tons of waste is disposed of in inappropriate Brazilian locations annually (ABRELPE, 2016).

Not oblivious to this reality and aware of the infrastructure deficits that compromise efforts to mitigate solid waste's environmental impacts, Brazilian agencies have implemented policies to solve ecological problems caused by this waste. Among these policies, the National Policy on Solid Waste (NPSW) stands out. The NPSW was instituted through Brazilian Federal Law 12,305 in 2010. Among its other objectives, the NPSW sought the mitigation of environmental impacts caused by the disposal of solid waste at inappropriate locations. One of the mitigation efforts was the development of a reverse logistics system to facilitate collection and recovery of manufactured waste through the combined efforts of stakeholders, government, waste pickers, and the private sector (BRAZIL, 2010).

Among the actions to be taken as part of the reverse logistics system was to set up the Integrated Solid Waste Management Program in concert with the Brazilian government, the World Bank, and Caixa Economica Federal, a large Brazilian bank. The Program is intended to support the development of municipal solid waste solutions that take into account social, political, economic and environmental issues. The Program requires that municipalities establish an integrated solid waste management plan to improve solid waste handling and disposal. Waste picker cooperatives and associations assumed a central role in these plans since their actions are fundamental to the success of the NPSW.

The NPSW made the construction of sanitary landfills to replace old landfills and dumps a priority. Sanitary landfills were defined as disposal sites that are environmentally appropriate for the disposal of tailings generated by anthropic activities. Actual construction depended on municipal efforts or efforts by consortiums made up of more than one municipality, but the federal government offered assistance to aid in their construction. This assistance was conditioned on the completion of construction by the end of 2014 (article 54). Due to difficulties in the cleanup up of old dumps, Brazil's senate approved Law Project 425/2014 extending the deadline for municipalities with less than 50,000 inhabitants until July 2021 (BRAZIL, 2014).

The NPSW separates waste materials into two categories: the first category covers waste that has no economic value and is not subject to the 4Rs of sustainability (reduce, reuse, recycle and recover). This valueless waste must be disposed of properly. The second category covers waste that has economic value and is amenable to the 4Rs (BRAZIL, 2010). Through the NPSW, the Brazilian government

provides economic incentives to encourage the separation of items subject to the 4Rs from other solid waste, their storage, and their commercialization; it also prioritizes the participation of waste picker cooperatives and associations in the performance of this task (BRAZIL, 2010).

In Brazil, members of waste picker associations sort solid waste left at the street side to separate out items that may be of value as recyclables prior to collection by the municipal garbage removal service. They then transport the items they have “picked out” to a central location and sort and consolidate them by type (plastic, metal, paper). After completion of this process, the items are sold by the association, and the net receipts are equally distributed among association members. If waste producers properly separate recyclable solid waste from the valueless waste, the entire waste removal system is made more efficient and recyclable manufactured materials are more likely to be recovered.

Some actions beyond the scope of direct government control are relevant to the success of solid waste management programs, especially selective collection and environmental education. While beyond direct control, the NPSW and the Integrated Solid Waste Management Program need to include mechanisms that actively encourage communal action to support sustainable waste management (PEREIRA; TEIXEIRA, 2011). The Integrated Solid Waste Management Program does prioritize selective collection, but the successful realization of this priority depends on environmental education. Brazilian Federal Law 9795/99 (BRAZIL, 1999) is intended to address the need for environmental education by instructing stakeholders to work together and create an environmental education agenda to build collective social values and disseminate knowledge, skills and abilities promoting environmental conservation for the society’s common good and to better insure the sustainability of natural systems. The Law directs the National Environmental System (SISNAMA), other federal, state, and municipal agencies, public and private educational institutions, and public and non-governmental environmental education organizations to work together in this regard (BRAZIL, 1999).

Environmental education should be stressed because a lack of environmental awareness can hinder waste management operations. Waste producers must learn what waste is recyclable and be motivated to separate recyclables from valueless solid waste. The separation of recyclables from other solid waste by those that produce the waste and selective collection of these recyclables are essential for effective trash processing, sanitary landfill operations and also for the success of waste picker associations and cooperatives; and environmental education plays a key role in the efficiency of these operations and organizations (AMATE; CARNEIRO; HOEFEL, 2017). If the local population does not correctly separate waste, waste picker association members will earn less because they are paid by the value of the recyclables, not by the hour (BRAZIL, 2010). Environmental education is the first step in efficiently maintaining the solid waste recycling process. It will teach those that produce the trash how to properly separate out recyclables and, hopefully, motivate them to do so.

As noted previously, the NPSW affirms that residues subject to the 4Rs of sustainability should be treated by cooperatives and associations whose members have the responsibility for collecting, separating, storing, recycling and commercializing these materials (BRAZIL, 2010). The cooperatives and associations are legally recognized and made up of individuals whose designation is that of “waste picker.” These individuals are the focus of this study.

The waste picker profession is prominently noted in the NPSW, as would be expected for an occupation that plays a crucial role in the management of solid waste in Brazil. The profession is listed in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO), and their reclamation activity has been regulated since 2002 (CBO n° 5.192-05); however, the waste picker profession offers onerous working conditions, low pay, and the waste picker’s daily activities are unspecified (BRAZIL, 2002). The main reasons a person becomes a waste picker are to avoid the stigma of unemployment and, more importantly, to see to the survival of themselves and their families (NAVARRETE-HERNANDEZ; NAVARRETE-HERNANDEZ, 2017).

Waste pickers work in an unhealthy environment. This fact is recognized by Brazilian Regulatory Standard 15 (NR 15), which defines the limits of unhealthy work conditions and the percentage of salary increase that should be paid to workers exposed to unhealthy work conditions. The Standard’s classification system rates waste picker activity at the maximum unhealthy level and recommends that a 40 percent addition to the basic salary be paid to all workers in this profession. The NR 15 rating suggests that resource recovering activity is strongly harmful to worker health and safety (BRAZIL, 1978b); however, as Dall’agnol and Fernandes (2007) and Siqueira and Moraes (2009) note, protections

against injury and biological, chemical, and ergonomic risks are infrequently employed at the job sites.

Not only is waste picking unhealthy and dangerous, those that enter the profession are unflatteringly stereotyped by society, which causes shame, humiliation, and strongly discourages their appearance in public spaces (SANTOS; SILVA, 2011). Society needs to become educated as to the important role waste pickers play in maintaining the environment and creating a sustainable, appealing ecosystem. In addition, waste picking activity has other core functions: waste pickers are responsible for the reintroduction of recyclable waste into the productive process and play an educational and symbolic role in the urban context by “giving recycling a face, a personality and history” (TEODÓSIO; DIAS; SANTOS, 2016, p.31).

Although employment as a waste picker is essential to the lives of many of Brazil’s poor and their service has an important role in the country’s environmental development, the activity involves several social and economic negatives. Brazil needs waste pickers to stay on the job, and waste pickers need to know that they fairly compensated, properly insured against job related injury, and that they are valued members of society. The objective of our study was to discover how a group of waste pickers working with a recycling association feel about their job, their status in society, and the conditions at their workplace using the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) technique.

METHODOLOGY

STUDY OBJECT

The research for this study was conducted at the Recycling Waste Pickers Association warehouse located in a city in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte’s Seridó region. The study’s subjects were the Association’s 11 members. The Association was selected because it met the main study defined parameters in that it was a young association and had operational problems regarding solid waste management: the municipality does not have a sanitary landfill or a proper selective collection system.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Data were collected during several visits to the Association between November and December 2016. During the first visit, each of the 11 associates was asked to answer questions from a questionnaire and interviewed. The questions were designed to determine the waste pickers’ profiles, whereas the interviews aimed to verify their perceptions of working conditions at the Association.

The study followed two lines of investigation, one quantitative and the other qualitative. Quantitative data collected through the interviews and from questionnaire answers were tabulated and divided into six aspects to generate an overall waste pickers’ profile. The six aspects were gender, educational level, age group, characteristics of their first job, period in the Association, and income. A direct, intense, extensive observation technique was also employed to augment the quantitative data (MARCONI; LAKATOS, 2010).

Following Souza and Zione (2003) and Minayo (1992), the study’s qualitative investigation was designed to discover meanings, motives, values, attitudes, relations, processes and phenomena that cannot be numerically quantified. Our study’s qualitative data were gathered in two phases: the first was an application of the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) procedure; the second consisted of participant observation.

In the first phase, we aimed to understand what the waste pickers’ work entailed and discover their perceptions of working conditions in the Association and their lives in general. Thus, data collected during the interviews were transcribed and then examined to identify the waste pickers’ core ideas. These core ideas formed the basis for the collective subject discourses, as established by the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) methodology developed by Lefevre and Lefevre (2003). Table 1 shows these core ideas and the discussion topics used to elicit them. When practicing CSD, researchers obtain group testimonies through open questioning to make a more detailed analysis in regards to the study objective (LEFEVRE; LEFEVRE; 2003; LEFEVRE; LEFEVRE, 2006). The Collective Subject Discourse technique aims to give voice to the participants and promote the group’s collective thinking without altering the content of their answers, which enables their reproduction for comparison with a similar group.

The Participant Observation technique was employed in the second phase of the qualitative investigation. This technique involves the researcher directly interacting with the study subjects, frequently analyzing and experiencing their daily lives. For Spradley (1980), Participant Observation is a tool that can be used to understand new situations and capture the implications of a group of participant's actions and interactions in the particular context under study. In order to properly apply this technique, it is crucial that the observer avoid stereotyping the actors and be prepared to separate and eliminate any prior preconceptions from the analysis. Since the study's qualitative component is intended to uncover the reasons waste pickers took the job, their opinions of the work, and their motivations for continuing, researchers must have a clear understanding of what is being said during an interview and use their observational skills to develop valid insights.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INTERVIEWED WASTE PICKERS

The Association has been active in the collection and recycling of solid waste since 2014. Association members work from Monday through Friday collecting material from three neighborhoods in the urban area's perimeter. As noted in the Methodology section, the organization was made up of 11 waste pickers during the research period.

Educationally, 63.6 percent of workers had only a primary education, mostly incomplete, and 27.3 percent were illiterate. Just one of those interviewed had some high school experience (9.1%). All were born in the studied municipality, and the majority were female (81.8%). The waste pickers interviewed were between 26 and 54 years of age, with a mean age of approximately 41 years. Other authors examining garbage services gathered similar age data: Bosi (2008) found that 70 percent of the collectors were between the ages of 31 and 60 and almost 50 percent were between 41 and 60; Silva and J6ia (2008) found that 85 percent of the waste pickers were between 21 and 60 years old.

Selective collection was not the first job for the majority of those under study. Those previously employed outside the waste collection industry had worked as domestic help, baby-sitters, salespeople, bricklayers and drivers. Of waste pickers interviewed, 36.4 percent had previously worked as recyclers. More than half of the waste pickers (54.5%) had worked with the Association since its inception in 2014.

The interviewed waste pickers said that their monthly income varied between R\$ 300.00 and R\$ 500.00 (approximately US\$90.00 and US\$150.00.). Payment came after the Association's operational and maintenance costs were deducted from total operating income. Net income was then divided equally among all the Association's members. When asked if this was their only job, 36.4 percent stated that it was. The other waste pickers' second jobs were as house cleaners, seamstresses, mechanics, drivers, and baby-sitters.

All the waste pickers said that they liked the activity but think that their income is too low when the risk of injury, the strenuousness of the work, and the unhealthy work environment are factored in. At the time of the interviews, all workers were married, and 10 of the 11 had children. The majority of the workers rented living space (72.7%), and the rest (27.3%) shared living space with a parent or were provided living space by a parent.

THE JOB

According to the Association, the waste pickers' work is divided into four phases: (i) prior to pick up on municipal garbage collection days, waste pickers gather discarded materials that can be resold from homes and small businesses in each neighborhood, especially PET bottles (polyethylene terephthalate), cardboard, aluminum (pans, home utensils), and copper objects (electrical wiring) and transport it to the Association warehouse; (ii) at the warehouse, the gathered material is separated and consolidated in one of four specific zones depending on type of material: copper, plastic, cardboard or aluminum; (iii) the waste pickers check the condition of the objects gathered and redistribute them within their zones by material quality; (iv) the separated material is sold to outside firms. The Association receives R\$0.60/kg for plastic bottles, R\$0.40/kg for cardboard, R\$2.00/kg for aluminum, and R\$ 9.00/kg for copper.

Waste pickers are supposed to work 47.5 hours per week gathering recyclables, separating them

by type and condition, and selling them. They are scheduled to work between 6 am and 5 pm Monday through Friday, with a daily lunch break from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. The waste pickers are divided into three working teams: two teams to select and gather the materials in each neighborhood; one team to separate the solid waste at the warehouse. One of the associates is the Association president and attends to bureaucratic issues.

3.3 COLLECTIVE SUBJECT DISCOURSE

All interviews were realized with Association members individually during the execution of their activities at the warehouse. The warehouse is lent to the Association by the municipality. The interviews were conducted to discover the associates' perceptions regarding conditions at work. The responses were transcribed and excerpts were separated for data analysis.

A framework was developed to facilitate in-depth analysis of each topic. The framework is described below and shown in Table 1. In accordance with the Collective Subject Discourse (CSD) methodology developed by Lefevre and Lefevre (2003), for each of the answers analyzed, one or more Core(s) Idea(s) is identified and is represented by the acronym (CI) in Table 1. The first number in parenthesis (N_1) stands for the number of answers related to that Core Idea, and the second number (N), represents the number of subjects that were asked the question. For example, if the question could have been answered by all 11 respondents and just two had that Core Idea, the frame will show (2/11); but if the Core Idea is related with just six persons and just two reported, the number in the parenthesis will be (2/6). The collective discourse revolved around the four questions and nine Core Ideas presented in the Table.

Table 1 – Collective Subject Discourse Topics and Synthesized Respondents' Answers

Question	Core Idea – (N_1/N)
A) What led you to work with waste collection at the Association?	Not being unemployed (7/11) Because I previously worked with recycling (4/11)
B) What are the biggest obstacles in working here?	Low Salary (8/11) Unhealthy job conditions (3/11)
C) What is the most relevant motivation in working here?	Having money in the end of month (9/11) Taking care of the environment (2/11)
D) Do you want to stay or leave the Association? Why?	I intend to continue here, if my income raise (6/11) I intend to continue to not be unemployed (4/11) I want to leave to study (1/11)
Note: (N_1) Number of respondents, which expressed the Core Idea; N: Whole number of interviewees.	

WHAT LED YOU TO WORK WITH WASTE COLLECTION AT THE ASSOCIATION?

According to the interviewees' answers, the majority, 63.6 percent, said that they began to work as waste pickers because they did not want to be unemployed. At the time of the interviews, all were married, 10 of the 11 had children, and all were responsible for their family's survival. It needs to be stressed that the income they earn as waste pickers is crucial to the lives of their families.

Studies by the Institute of Technological Research (IPT, 2003) and Gonçalves (2013) found that the main objective of waste picker cooperatives is to insert people into the labor market and provide them with opportunities, income and organization. Gouveia (2012) and Silva and Joia (2008) found that waste picking is a marginal, low-income job and that many work in this activity to complement earnings from other jobs; but for others, it may be their only source of income. Medeiros and Macedo (2006) and Dantas et al. (2017) believe that many individuals who enter the labor market and earn guaranteed remuneration that meets their basic needs in terms of food, education, and housing have both improved their quality of life and acquired a stake in society.

The interviews also displayed the waste pickers' fragility in terms of formal education: only 26.4 percent had completed elementary education and 27.7 percent were illiterate. Not only did the

interviewed waste pickers have little formal education, but nearly all were middle aged women (81.9%). Despite still being economically active, poorly educated middle aged women are extremely marginalized in Brazil. This unfortunate combination of characteristics excludes those interviewed, especially the women, from the vast majority of job opportunities, leaving waste picking as one of the handful of legal activities they can engage in to survive.

Due the waste pickers' low monthly income, 63.6% engaged in other informal paid activities. The other sources of income came from employment as house cleaners, seamstresses, mechanics, drivers and baby-sitters. For 36.4 percent of the associates, waste picking is their only source of income, making it difficult for them to guarantee their basic needs.

Finally, it was asked why they began to work as waste pickers. Four of the 11 (36.4%) entered the Association because they had experience as waste pickers. They had gathered solid recyclable materials on their own at landfills, dumps, or by picking through trash bags and drums containing waste at private residences prior to its collection by the municipal garbage service. They subsequently sold the material, without proper screening, at very low prices to intermediaries. According to an IPEA report (2012), this practice is quite common. Independent waste picking is clearly very informal work and does not integrate the worker into the nation's labor market or provide NPSW protections and possible benefits.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST OBSTACLES IN WORKING HERE?

Slightly over the half of the interviewees (54.5%) reported that the major negative aspect of their work was how little they earned: between R\$ 300.00 and R\$ 500.00 a month. In contrast, the monthly nominal household income of Rio Grande do Norte residents in 2016 was around R\$ 920; that year the minimum wage in Brazil was R\$ 880.00 IBGE (2016). In December 2016, the Brazilian Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE) estimated that the minimum wage required to maintain basic living conditions for a family of four was R\$3,856.00 (DIEESE, 2016).

In order to earn this below minimum wage, the waste picker often works 57 hours per week, thirteen more hours that is permitted by Brazilian law. Those earnings combined earnings from second jobs are used to cover their family's expenses for food, health care, leisure, and all other basic needs. For 72.7 percent of those interviewed, those earnings must also be used to manage housing costs. According to Dantas et al. (2017), to have what can be considered pleasant work, housing, health care, the work environment, and income must be balanced. The waste pickers' precarious income situation needs to be analyzed, debated and critically viewed.

Employment as a waste picker is paradoxical: the income does not actually cover basic needs. According to Medeiros and Macedo (2006), despite offering an employment opportunity and, hence, income, this profession does not provide the minimum wage required to cover basic needs; for this reason it offers "exclusion by inclusion." The waste picker is included in society through work (economically) but excluded from society by performing that particular activity (socially).

Returning to work related issues, 27.3 percent of the waste pickers indicated that they fear the work would cause diseases. Waste pickers work at a job that encompasses many diverse activities, such as gathering, separating and commercializing a large heterogeneous volume of solid waste, which exposes them to biological, chemical, physical and ergonomic hazards. As previously noted, waste picking is classified at the maximum risk level by Brazilian Regulatory Standard 15 (NR-15), which rates the risk of each job category. NR-15 "assures the worker of additional payment" if they "work in unhealthy conditions." The additional payment is to be between 10 percent and 40 percent of their basic salary; and in the case of jobs that necessitate the handling of solid waste, the increment should be the maximum (BRAZIL, 1978b). Unfortunately, waste pickers have no basic salary. The negative issues related waste picking are many and include exposure to extreme heat, moisture, microorganisms, venomous animals, and sharp materials.

Brazilian Regulatory Standard NR-6 mandates that workers be provided with Individual Protection Equipment (IPE) "where general measures do not provide full protection against the risk of occupational accidents and diseases." Essential IPE equipment is defined as proper gloves, respiratory masks, sleeves, sunscreen, earmuffs and sunglasses (BRAZIL, 1978a). Waste pickers' activities require the utilization of IPE; but that admonition is not often followed, either due to a personal decision or, more commonly, because the Association doesn't have the money to buy the equipment. By not using

protective equipment, the worker becomes more exposed to the profession's health and injury problems. Quite often the associate's only source of income is removed when a job related health issue forces the associate to miss work. Since associates do not receive formal employment documents, these workers do not receive Social Security payments or are they able to claim any of the benefits provided by the Brazilian Consolidation of Labor Law (CLT).

The interviews made it evident that not only do Brazilian waste pickers face quality of life difficulties, they face survival issues. The life of a waste picker is a precarious struggle: Outside the workplace they are likely shunned by society; on the job there is a good chance that they will be struck down by physical problems. To compound these difficulties, waste pickers don't earn enough to save for emergencies and don't qualify for whatever "safety net" that the Brazilian government or the country's unions provide. Briefly, the four most serious problems waste pickers confront are low income, unhealthy and risky working conditions, exclusion from the country's social safety net, and societal preconceptions related with their profession.

WHAT IS THE MOST RELEVANT MOTIVATION IN WORKING HERE?

For 81.8 percent of the interviewees "having money in the end of the month" is their major motivation to work in the Association. Two interviewees (18.2%) were motivated by the satisfaction they get being involved with recycling. They affirmed that their main motivation is related with the opportunity to reduce negative environmental impacts caused by prematurely and improperly discarded waste generated in the city.

The collection and separation of recyclable material from urban waste has obvious positive aspects, especially in the context of sustainable development, and waste pickers in Brazil have a pivotal role in recycling. This perception is confirmed by the prominence of waste pickers in NPSW guidelines for the design of municipal solid waste plans and urban solid waste management programs. Waste pickers act directly to guard natural resources by saving the energy and water needed to initially manufacture a recyclable product, thereby reducing contamination of the soil, water and air (ANDRADE; ALCÂNTARA, 2016). Residential recycling in many Brazilian cities would be negligible without waste pickers, and as Medeiros and Macedo (2007) conclude, recycling has become a decisive factor in the sustainable treatment of urban waste.

DO YOU WANT TO STAY OR LEAVE THE ASSOCIATION? WHY?

Of the interviewed waste pickers, 54.5 percent indicated that the extremely modest income they earn by collecting and sorting recyclables is the main reason they are open to changing occupations. As stated by one waste picker, "I intend to continue if my income improves." The possibility that waste picking will provide enough income to satisfy their family's basic needs is what keeps the waste pickers working in the Association even though their income is at best marginally sufficient, the working conditions are unhealthy, and they are socially stigmatized. Jesus et al. (2012) maintain that for most solid waste pickers the job allows them to have a place to live and improves their quality of life, and that is what keeps them in the Association. It seems clear that if they were offered a better job, one that would improve their family's living conditions, the waste pickers would migrate to this job even if it involved an activity completely outside their expertise.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) (2011) has developed the "decent work" concept, which is loosely defined by four overlapping strategic conditions: the work allows the freedom to join a labor union; it is not slave/forced labor; that it does not involve child labor; and that it is non-discriminatory, productive work that serves a social interest. Guimarães (2012) defines decent work in the Brazilian reality as work that takes place in a secure work environment, provides adequate income, is productive, is not excessively lengthy, connects with the worker's personal life, prioritizes workers' health and safety, provides equal opportunities, and offers social security benefits.

Our study's research uncovered compelling evidence that the job of waste picker is unsafe and unhealthy due to heat, humidity, chemical agents, the above average chance of physical accidents, and the prevalence of disease-carrying organisms. To exacerbate the dangers, waste pickers are not covered by a social security umbrella that shields them from the consequences of work related incapacitation and/or the loss of earnings power.

Regarding the time spent at work, this issue also is viewed as problematic. Analyzed in respect

to Guimarães' (2012) stipulation that decent work connects with the worker's personal life, waste pickers spend an inordinate amount of time working and that leaves their families in the background.

The combination of disincentives (dangerous work, low wages, and long hours) indicates that the socioeconomic inclusion the Association provides for those that were previously unemployed is not the type of inclusion envisioned by the ILO, the Brazilian Consolidation of Labor Law (CLT), or the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Employment. It is unfortunate that members of Brazilian waste picker associations, associations that provide a valuable public service, suffer job related problems that in all likelihood serve to demoralize them. According to Aragão Neto and Gomes (2016), the sum of all the negative aspects connected with the job of waste picker compromises their human dignity and threatens the functionality of the NPSW.

Despite there being rather severe job related difficulties, 36.4 percent of the interviewed waste pickers want to stay in the Association. Most likely this is because they don't see a possibility of finding better jobs elsewhere. Waste pickers perceive the profession as the only viable income producing option that can guarantee their family's basic survival. Waste picking is very similar to subsistence living in an urban setting because the income generated is incompatible with upward mobility.

Upward mobility and access to better jobs is outside most waste pickers' reality. Medeiros and Macedo (2007) note the lack of a proper education limits the waste pickers' access to schools that provide technical training. Ferreira (2005) concludes that even for waste pickers who could be more economically active, their educational level makes their chance of entering the formal labor market almost nil. Although a low level of formal education is a common characteristic among waste pickers, Bosi (2008) comments that the ability to perform basic mathematical operations would be useful when weighing, negotiating and calculating the value of the recycled material. Lack of schooling leaves waste pickers on the margins of the job market and even prevents them from working with other types of solid waste that have higher commercial value and are more industrially useful (ABRELPE, 2016).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study examined individual members of the Recycling Waste Pickers Association. The Association's members collect recyclable solid waste materials disposed of at street side, transport these materials to a central location, usually a warehouse, separate them by material type and quality, and then commercialize them with the support of the Association. Although this activity produces insufficient income to attend to all the workers' needs, it does contribute to their livelihoods and gives them a modicum of self-respect; while to society's benefit, it assuages a guilty conscience, positively impacts the environment, and gives those that might be society's problem some interest in preserving society.

The profiles, life circumstances, and plans for the future of waste pickers affiliated with the Association resemble those of waste pickers addressed by other researchers in Brazil. Their studies substantiate our findings that the major obstacles for the development of this sector and those working in it are the occupational risks faced when gathering and separating recyclable materials (biological, ergonomic, physical, and chemical), low income, strenuous activity, an absence of job guarantees, and society's negative view of the job itself.

The interviewed waste pickers' perceptions of their job revealed during the study's application of the Collective Subject Discourse technique were quite negative, and these feelings appear justified. The creation of the National Policy on Solid Waste (NPSW) indicates that the Brazilian government is aware of the problems that have caused these perceptions. Through conscientious application of the standards set by the NPSW, the conditions waste pickers work under will be improved and a number of the work's negative aspects should be ameliorated. Although there has been robust progress to improve working conditions for those working in hazardous professions, with waste picking ranking near the top of the hazardous list, there is a long road to travel before waste picker activity can be categorized as decent work.

An effort has also been made to remove the social stigma attached to waste picking as an activity. Through its addition to the Brazilian Occupation Classification (CBO) register, waste picking has been legally recognized as a profession. The government is actively promoting waste picker cooperatives and associations to add structure to what could only loosely be termed casual labor. These actions and

others have made access to government benefits, such as workers compensation and social security coverage, a less remote possibility. Waste pickers are slowly moving into the realm of normal society.

There is one important caveat that affects the advantages government involvement in waste picker activities should bring, and that is enforcement. If the regulations, laws, and guarantees mandated by the NPSW and those stipulated by the Brazilian Consolidation of Labor Law are not enforced, waste pickers will continue to be excluded by society and their lives will remain extremely tenuous and dangerous. To ensure that waste pickers have some chance of living a decent and rewarding life, mechanisms must be put in place to guarantee that waste pickers are provided with safety equipment and that the prerogatives of social inclusion, such as social security coverage and compensation for work related injury, are made available.

Waste picker associations only gather PET plastic, aluminum, copper and cardboard. There is a great diversity of marketable materials that could be collected but aren't. Future recycling studies could address expanding the collectable items' list, considering income opportunities, safety issues, commercial feasibility, and sanitary landfill operations.

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