

Work, Health and Organization of Waste Picking in Fortaleza, Brazil

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Abstract

It is estimated that 8 to 10 thousand people work with garbage picking in Fortaleza. Street waste pickers are organized in 16 associations and a larger number work for small garbage deposits. How the work is accomplished in these two types of organizations, the main aspects of the work and health problems were studied by interviewing 30 collectors (5 focus groups), one deposit owner and two association directors. The data showed that waste picking is a precarious informal job, both in associations and deposits. Associations, although providing recognition and solidarity to some extent, do not succeed in transform working conditions in the direction of a more decent and less precarious job and are not perceived by workers as a means of social inclusion and participation. In relation to their health problems, workers report back pain, traffic accidents, infections and injuries.

Key words

Waste pickers, health, work conditions, associative work.

Introduction

Collection and recycling of solid waste residues by specialized industrial plants have been considered a possible answer to the accumulation of garbage produced in urban centers due to population and consume growth. Recycling of solid materials consists in the reprocessing of plastic, aluminum, paper and other materials by specialized industrial plants or in the use of these materials directly in the production of new consumer goods by the industry. Reprocessing materials can lead to economic, environmental and social advantages. Economic advantages concern to the possibility of increasing profits due to the use of less expensive raw materials. Environmental advantages of reprocessing are the better management of natural resources and the reduction of environmental pollution caused by the accumulation of garbage in streets and dump areas. Social issues are also involved in recycling due to the creation of new occupations related to collection, picking and separation of solid waste residues, generally done by poor people in the large urban centers of the third world. In other words there is in these countries a tendency to formalize jobs such as the picking and separation of recycling materials from garbage in the streets and dump areas as a way to solve the social issue of finding occupation to people excluded from the formal market. This system, based in economical, environmental and social dimensions, is being applied with more or less efficiency by different countries (Dall'Angol & Fernandes, 2007; Machado et al., 2006; Buenrostro & Bocco, 2003; Moreno-Sánchez & Maldonado, 2006; Mota, 2005).

Bosi (2008) describes how waste pickers appeared in Brazil's social scenario, showing that this kind of occupation is not new. According to the author, waste pickers are present in the national literature since 1947, as is also pointed by Mota (2005). But waste picking for recycling have become a viable economic process only after jobs in industries turned scarce. This means that the increase in waste picking was only possible because there was a large group of people in need of any occupation in order to survive and ready to live on very low earnings, leading to profits for the

recycling industries. In 2002, waste picking was officially recognized by the Brazilian Government as an informal job, described in the National Catalogue of Jobs (Catálogo Brasileiro de Ocupações) (Brasil, 2002). In general, waste pickers have low or no formal education at all, no qualification and are ready to submit to a very low income. The growth in the number of waste pickers in Brazil, according to Bosi (2008), was intense in the last decades: in 1999, there were 300,000 workers involved in waste picking, whereas in 2005, the number of workers in this occupation was more than one million, which represents an increase of about 240%. According to the IBGE - Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics - (IBGE, 2008), these workers can be found in all Brazilian cities and the 2000 population census detected 24,500 waste pickers, of which, 22% were under 14 years old (IBGE, 2008). It is estimated that only in Fortaleza, capital of Ceará, there are between 8 to 10 thousand people working with garbage picking (IMPARH, 2006).

Waste pickers can be associated or independent workers. In Fortaleza there are about 16 waste pickers associations. The association operates as a workers' cooperative, although none of the 16 associations is formalized as such, once in Brazil formalization of a cooperative is a process that demands bureaucratic skills and involves costs that they cannot afford. However, the municipality and local government recognize their existence and provide help and assistance, such as the donation of areas for storage of residues and administrative offices; a truck for the transport of separated materials to industries; and pushcarts, essential for an efficient waste picking task. Some associations receive help and support from national and international Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) and from sectors of the Catholic Church. The number of workers in each association varies. There are associations with only 5 waste pickers and others with 50 or more. Lima (2006) refers to this kind of organizations as "associations to generate employment and labor income" and calls attention to their precarious conditions of management and functioning. She points out that in Brazil from the 1990s on, the creation of workers' cooperatives and associations

was motivated by changes in the capitalist system and has received the blessing of governments. In this context waste pickers' associations were founded all over the country, supplying work and income to the poor population without other occupational alternatives. These organizations face various difficulties and challenges due to the lack of knowledge in dealing with market issues and poor working conditions. To handle the problem of selling the product of their work, waste pickers' associations of Fortaleza constituted an associations' net. The net allows associations to share the few resources available, such as truck and pieces of land borrowed from the municipality, and to sell separated materials directly to recycling plants. The net is managed by associations' representatives elected by the workers. However, net management is only possible with the support of a NGO. Aquino et al (2009) studying a similar network of the southern states of Brazil, showed that the net can represent an economic advantage of about 32% in the normal income of waste pickers.

One important question related to this kind of association is if the model can be a true social-political solution in terms of being an alternative to the salary system and if it promotes a sense of autonomy and social inclusion for workers.

Discussing this issue, Lima (2006) points out that workers' cooperatives and associations are seen by their members, in general, as a simple occupation and not as a mean to reach social or political participation and that the model can be positive only if it reflects some effective gains in autonomy, either in the formalization of the activities, or in self-management directives, even when they are not effective in economic terms, and when they can contribute to the construction of occupational alternatives. However, the author concludes that at the moment, flexible working activities, as can be found in the associations' model, only means precarious work.

Besnard (1980), on the other hand, indorse the associative model saying that it has the potential to complement an individual's cultural and participative needs. Associations are seen as essential

agents for qualification and participation of workers in the direction of social development and as bases of the social structure, promoting relationships among individuals. Besides that, when managed in a co-administrative and self-administrative way, they shape one's participation and autonomy.

Following the same idea, some authors believe that waste pickers' associations represent a viable model to generate employment and income and, at the same time, a solution to decrease the quantity of solid wastes produced in large urban centers. Although the difficulties of management and the precarious conditions of these associations are recognized, they believe that the model should be supported by governments, once waste pickers' associations can solve at least a part of the unemployment problem (Bartoli, 2009; Rosa et al, 2006; Velloso, 2005; Andrade & Guerreiro, 2001; Medina, 1997).

Martins (2005) analyses three waste pickers' associations of Rio Grande do Sul and concludes that the associations are a good example of the beneficial effects of interactions between governmental sectors, NGO's and Catholic Church and that they allow workers to have a sense of participation and autonomy.

However, the number of workers in the associations or linked to the net of associations in Fortaleza is very small compared with the large number of independent workers in the area. Independent waste pickers work for private owned garbage deposits. These are small organizations managed by a profiteer, deposit owner, called, in Fortaleza, "deposeiro". The organization provides the pushcart exclusively for the activities of picking recycling materials from the streets and garbage cans and bags in residential areas, buys the collected materials and resells them to recycling plants. In exchange for the pushcart, the waste picker has to sell the materials only to the deposit from where the pushcart was taken, without the possibility of negotiating prices. Deposits vary in size and its

economic power is measured by the number of pushcarts available to workers. There are deposits with few carts, about 3 or 4, and others with 100 or more.

The purpose of this study is to verify if waste pickers' associations can be taken as an organizational model that promotes an effective autonomy and participation of workers and if this model is beneficial in terms of improving work and living conditions of its members compared to the "job" of independent workers provided by deposits in Fortaleza, considering its particular cultural background.

A second objective is to investigate health conditions of waste pickers. It is known that work with garbage can lead to injuries and occupational diseases (Santos Filho et al, 2003). Medeiros & Macedo (2007) analyzing Brasilia's waste pickers concluded that the work means a risk for physical health and prejudices psychological well being, once workers are stigmatized and discriminated by the population for the kind of work they do. Studies investigating garbage waste pickers of dump areas or landfills and streets waste pickers in Brazil indicate that these workers do not report work related diseases with a higher frequency than the normal population, although they report work accidents such as cuts, falls and traffic accidents (Porto et al, 2004). The situation seems to be the same in other countries. An et al (1999) in a study with solid waste collectors of Florida found that these workers were subjected to accident risks and injuries but that occupational diseases were, probably, not notified.

Torun et al (2006) and Wilson et al (2006) describe the main health problems related to waste picking. They list, among others, musculoskeletal problems, cuts, dermatitis, diarrheas and infections as being frequent in these workers. Silva et al (2006) found a prevalence 44.7% higher of minor mental disorders among waste pickers of Pelotas, Brazil, when compared to a control group.

Approach and methods

A qualitative method was chosen in order to answer the questions posed by the objectives. The choice of a qualitative method concerns the idea of exploring the psychosocial dimensions of the work, comparing associations and deposits and describing their main differences in an exploratory way.

Thirty waste pickers, associated and independent, participated in the study. They were distributed in 5 focus groups of 4 to 6 workers each and were interviewed collectively. The decision to use a collective interview technique was due, in part, to difficulties of observing and talking to workers during their daily journey in the streets and to the precarious conditions encountered in the associations and deposits. Collective interviews took place at the university and the groups were organized by the associations and deposits participating in the study. Transport to workers was provided by researchers and the workers received R\$ 10.00 (US\$ 5.00) for their participation in the focus group and also a lunch was served after the interview. Of the five groups, two were formed by associated workers and two by independent workers; one was a mixture of associated and independent workers. One deposit owner and two directors of associations were also individually interviewed. The interviews with the focus groups lasted one and a half hours in average and only one encounter was done with each group.

Following the technique of Collective Work Analyses only one question was posed to the groups: “Please, report a day’s work”, and as the talk proceeded and new issues were brought to the conversation, the researchers tried to question them about health problems, their work organization and psychosocial factors. Initially, the workers were asked to state their names, age and how long they were working as waste pickers.

All interviews were recorded and transcript. The analyses was done using all materials collected, focusing in the unities of meaning among the various themes raised in the discourses. The intention was to identify the differences in the activities and psychosocial dimensions of associated and

independent workers, as well as reports of accidents and occupational diseases that could be linked to the work.

Transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed with the aid of a computer program for qualitative research and the final results were reached after various readings and discussions by the research team.

As already mentioned, participants have very low or no formal education, with some rare exceptions, some could not sign their names. The great majority do not have any professional qualification and those who have being employed before, use to perform activities such as construction work, maid and other manual work.

The participants mentioned that they use to reside in the periphery of Fortaleza, without housing infrastructure and considered areas of high social risk. Some participants referred that they do not have a fix address and use to sleep in the streets and in rooms rented by one night. Table 1 shows participants age and gender and the time in the job for some of them.

Table 1: Participants

Name	Focus Group	Age (years)	Type of organization	Sex	Time on the job
Luiz	FG1	60	Independent	Male	12 years
Francisco José	FG1	31	Independent	Male	-
Washington	FG1	47	Independent	Male	20 years
Ana	FG1	40	Independent	Female	-
Agenor	FG1	65	Independent	Male	-
César	FG2	33	Associated	Male	-
Luiz Fimino	FG1	59	Independent	Male	15 years
Francisco	FG2	30	Associated	Male	2 years
Geruza	FG2	47	Associated	Female	-
Diassis	FG2	42	Associated	Male	-
José	FG2	63	Associated	Male	-
Francisco Mendes	FG2	60	Associated	Male	-
Gildo	FG2	66	Associated	Male	-
Carlos	FG3	38	Independent	Male	-
Marcos	FG3	25	Independent	Male	-

Jaqueline	FG3	41	Independent	Female	-
Loira	FG3	38	Independent	Female	-
Paulista	FG3	48	Independent	Female	-
Acácio	FG3	59	Independent	Male	23 years
Maninho	FG4	26	Independent	Male	-
Graça	FG4	45	Associated	Female	-
Fátima	FG4	47	Associated	Female	-
Antonia	FG4	35	Independent	Female	8 years
Bill	FG4	35	Independent	Male	8 years
Maria	FG4	45	Associated	Female	-
Veronica	FG5	38	Associated	Female	1 year
Claudia	FG5	43	Associated	Female	12 years
Moisés	FG5	44	Associated	Male	12 years
Antonio	FG5	23	Associated	Male	6 months
Geisa	FG5	25	Associated	Female	5 months

Results

The data were analyzed using a method of discourse analyses. Discourses were separated by categories and subcategories of meaning. In this paper only some of the categories encountered are described. The results focus in three main themes: description of activities, differences and similarities in the work organization and psychosocial dimensions between deposits and associations and health issues. The first category describes the main activities performed by waste pickers, which constitutes the waste pickers job; the second points out the main differences related to be an independent or associated worker and the third focuses health problems, as perceived by workers.

Work Activities

Initially it is necessary to mention that in Fortaleza domestic garbage collection is organized and done by authorized firms, but there is no law or rule related to garbage separation and, therefore, households do not have to separate domestic waste in recycling components.

Waste pickers' work consists of catching a pushcart in the association or deposit or, sometimes, in the own residence and to walk for a specific area of the city, collecting possible recycling materials of the streets and garbage cans of residences and condominiums. But there are still pickers that just work with bags, which turn the work less efficient and the earnings smaller.

The travel course is free but each worker has it is own preferable path. There is a competition among workers to pick the garbage of the richest neighborhoods, once in these collected materials are more valuable and in larger quantities. Waste pickers choose the materials depending on the market price of each kind of recyclable, which varies daily, and also on his preferences which is dictated, in part, by the weight and volume that can be accommodated in the pushcart.

If, during the journey, the worker feels the need to eat, drink, rest or other necessities, he searches for a place, in general, isolated, or some commercial establishment. Sometimes, they eat food encountered in the garbage.

When the pushcart is full, the worker returns to the deposit or association where he borrowed the pushcart. There, he picks up recipients to separate and weight the materials collected. The weighing is done by the deposit owner or another waste picker. Depending on the time of arrival, the worker has to wait in order to have the materials weighting. The collected materials and the weight are recorded and the waste picker is paid accordingly.

The worker can, sometimes, keep the pushcart full of waste materials in his home and take the cart to the deposit or association in the next day, as well as choose the time of day to work (some workers prefer to work during the day, some at night). However, depending on the number of pushcarts of the association or deposit, if the waste picker arrives late there are no more pushcarts to borrow: "If I arrive late, there is no pushcart and I can't work that day".

When the pushcart brakes during the journey and the worker cannot come back to the deposit or association, he has to communicate the fact in order to have the pushcart repaired or to have the

collected material rescued. If the pushcart is robbed, which happens frequently, the deposit or association has to be communicated as soon as possible. In these cases, there is always a suspicion that the worker might have sold the instrument. If the worker proves that the cart has really been stolen, he doesn't have to pay back the corresponding amount, if not, he has to pay the value working for the association or deposit. Waste pickers cannot use the pushcart for small transports to third persons. If this happens, the worker is punished, either by being expelled of the organization or by violence.

A relevant aspect of the work is the ability to arrange materials within the pushcart. A "good" waste picker is the worker that knows which materials have the best prices and how to arrange materials in the cart to secure a better payment in the end of the day. Some described this activity: "one has to know how to divide the load between the tires and the lateral of the cart; if you put the load only in the back, you will not be able to lift it, if you put the load only in the front you will not be able to push it, because the cart can be very heavy".

Differences and similarities between deposits and associations

Work activities accomplished by waste pickers are essentially the same for independent or associated workers. However, there are differences in the way the work and affiliation are done in the two types of organizations, influencing working conditions and psychosocial dimensions of independent and associated professionals.

Associations have a list of waste pickers and only workers that belong to the association can borrow one of the association's pushcart. In the deposits there is also a list, once the owner tries to avoid robbery of his pushcarts and other kinds of problems with the worker. In order to do that, deposit owners make an investigation of the worker and, in general, only workers that have a fix address or are known by other workers of the same deposit are allowed to borrow a cart. Nevertheless, it is

easier to find a “job” in the deposits than it is to be an associated worker. When the pushcart is borrowed from a deposit, the waste picker can sell the materials collected only to that deposit. The same is valid for the associations.

The pushcart is simultaneously the work instrument and the work contract. It is the only link that bonds the worker with the association or deposit. According to the interviewed waste pickers, to own a pushcart is a mean of free oneself of what they consider to be their only limitation in terms of autonomy: to be forced to sell materials to one specific organization, the owner of the pushcart, without the possibility of negotiating prices.

Deposits and associations are responsible for the maintenance of the pushcarts. In the associations, this work is done by the workers and, due to lack of money, pushcarts in general are always broken or in bad conditions. One of the associations visited had only five pushcarts, donated by the municipality, all of them in a bad conservation state. Some waste pickers take good care of their cart, changing tires and other parts, and feel as if the cart belongs to them. In some deposits and associations this is respected, so that the worker is the only user of that particular pushcart.

Waste pickers narrate that they are in this job because they have no choice, no other work alternative; so that they have to submit themselves to this kind of occupation in order to survive. In other words, waste pickers belong to that population group that find themselves outside the work market, probably due to the global re-structuring production process and work organization, thoroughly treated in the literature of the last decades and that throw a large number of workers into precarious working and living conditions, incapable of finding a place in the “new industry” of the new capitalist era (see, for example, Antunes and Pochmann, 2008).

Maybe as a mechanism of defense, waste pickers believe they “work for themselves”. They narrate and proudly announce that they can choose the day they want to work, the hour, the journey hours,

where to go and what to pick, as shown in the following discussion that took place in two focus groups:

‘To me, work for myself is to be independent of others. We are our own “boss”.

We work for ourselves because we do not have a timetable to follow, we can arrive anytime. There is no boss to tell when one has to work and when one has to return or begin the work. Nobody complains about my work, because there is no boss. You do not have to notify anybody when you are going to arrive or live’ (Workers FG4: Deposit)

‘I don’t want to leave the “pushcart” job because in this job I do not have to bend to anyone, to humiliate myself in front of anybody’ (Worker FG2: Association)

The idea of being an “autonomous” worker among waste pickers was referred to as “proletarian autonomy” or “false autonomy” by Medeiros & Macedo (2007), once workers has no other choice of occupation in face of the lack of formal jobs and their daily work, without any time limitation, is, in fact, determined by the need to survive. Some waste pickers narrate that their daily earnings are only enough to feed themselves in the next day. The average workers’ daily earnings in Fortaleza is around R\$ 10.00 (US\$ 5.00). But the earnings vary according to the materials encountered and their prices. Associated workers, in general, receive more for the same amount of materials, once associations sell directly to the industries and are not subjected to the prices imposed by deposit owners.

In the associations, the process of selling materials to the recycling plants is coordinated by the workers. As the plants do not receive materials in small quantities and do not provide transport, the process requires a place to stock materials till there is enough quantity and means to transport it. In general, deposit owners have a truck or a car to deliver materials to the plants, but the associations

of Fortaleza have only one shared truck that pick up materials from all associations. The problem for the associations is that they cannot sell products with the same efficiency as deposits and they have no capital to pay workers as soon as the materials are weighted. In some cases, workers from associations sell the materials collected to one deposit, even when they use the association pushcarts, in order to receive the necessary daily payment. In some associations, workers receive the payment only in the end of the week, when materials are sold to the plants. This requires some sort of budget management which is not possible for a worker that depends of his daily payment in order to eat the next day.

Another difference between deposits and associations relates to the process of weighing. In the associations this process is also coordinated and supervised by the workers. In the deposits, the owner is responsible for the scale maintenance and workers are always suspicious of the reliability of the results and say that they cannot complain or raise doubts about the final result, which, in the end, reverts directly in their payments.

The number of women is somewhat smaller in this kind of job once the work is normally described as very hard. Nevertheless, associations are generally run by women and they appear proportionally in a larger number in the associations when compared to deposits. One of the associations that participated in the study was composed by 5 women, all linked to the local church. As mentioned, men, in general, used to work in construction or had jobs by the transport branch before waste picking, while women used to work as maids or had other domestic jobs. Some women narrate that they also work as maids parallel to picking waste.

Authoritarianism and violence are very common among associations and deposits as narrated by the workers, although their degree and content vary. Independent workers narrated various cases of violence involving deposit owners or competition among waste pickers. Deposit owners, sometimes, persecute workers and resort to violence if they are suspicious that the worker sold the

pushcart, that he is selling materials to another deposit or using the cart to make other kind of transports. Waste pickers' rivalry can also lead to violent behavior as when one worker "invades" the path of another.

In the associations, violence is linked, in general, to power disputes. Although associations should be run as workers' cooperatives, directors use to dismiss workers and take decisions without consulting others. As mentioned before, waste pickers do not have formal education and the large majority does not have reading or writing abilities. In this context a person with some of these capacities can easily dominate the others and impose his will over them. Among associated workers is common the suspicion that the leaders are using the money for their own needs. These suspicions are extended to the net of associations. In one of the groups (FG5), the association's director referred to the net manager as someone who does not show the main characteristic of a waste picker: "she is not a waste picker cause someone who has a car and the children are in a private school cannot be a true waste picker". The lack of formal education leads to feelings of helplessness by dealing with a formal system that requires some kind of formal abilities, such as arithmetic skills and understanding of official documents.

Another aspect that shows a considerable difference between independent and associated workers has to do with illicit activities, which appear as an option for independent workers but are not frequent among associated waste pickers. According to Medina (1997), waste pickers are frequently associated with dirt and diseases and recognized as a social nuisance, a symbol of failure or even as criminals. The deposit owner interviewed said that waste picking is an activity done by ex-convicts and about that the workers affirmed: "they say all waste pickers are criminals, some are and some aren't". The division line between illicit and licit activities is difficult to trace by these workers as they narrate that some materials are robbed and brought to the deposit as collected materials, sometimes materials from the electric or telephone net. According to them, the only thing one has to

do is to “chop” or “break” the object and sell the parts. Both deposits and associations use to refuse materials that seem to be robbed, but this is difficult to ascertain. However, this kind of behavior seems to be more frequent among independent workers.

Other illicit behavior very common among waste pickers is the use and distribution of drugs, such as “crack”. Among workers alcohol abuse is also common. Drug use is tolerated, but less in the associations than in deposits. Some workers narrate that owners of deposits use to pay workers with drugs.

Health problems

When asked about their health problems and if these problems could be related to work, workers tend to deny saying: “Thank God, I am healthy to work”. The same was reported by Torun et al (2006) in a study with Istanbul waste pickers.

However, workers report health problems that can be related to work such as musculoskeletal problems and fatigue due to the physical effort required to push the heavy cart during the work journey: “yes, I have back pain, cause pushing a cart like that, mainly for us women, is a very heavy work, isn’t it?” (FG2).

Some workers report that during the journey, mainly in the middle of the day, probably due to fatigue, heat or lack of food intake, they fell “blank” and have to stop to take a break or to eat something. Some waste pickers also reported that they use to eat food found in the garbage.

According to them: “we look to see if it is in good condition, without worms, than we eat it”.

Although this is a very frequent behavior, they do not report stomach problems.

In one of the focus groups (FG3), a woman narrated that she had a urinary infection and according to the women present, this was due to the fact that, in general, they use the pushcart and cardboard paper to make a cabin to urinate in the street, without any hygienic condition.

Although the occurrence of diseases is not perceived as directly related to work conditions, in one of the groups (FG3), a couple reported that: “Me and my husband here had hansenosis. He was the first to pick the disease, later, it was me, and this is because we use to put materials collected inside our home before taking it to the deposit”. In another group (FG4) a similar discourse described the same kind of situation. The waste picker had an infectious disease and had to be submitted to a chirurgic procedure, where he lost part of the leg and chest musculature. They also report dermatitis, showing the researchers their arms with lacerations.

On the other hand, in all focus groups there were reports of accidents with perforate-cutting objects. Workers do not use gloves or any other protective equipment and when searching for materials in garbage, they can be injured by broken glass, cans and other objects. As they say: “Many times, people do not worry in throwing glass bottles, cans, lamps, forks and knives in the garbage, in the hurry, we open the garbage bag and put the hand there without looking, cutting a finger or the hand”. These accidents are also reported by Medina (1997) and Wilson et al (2006) in their studies with waste pickers.

Falls and traffic accidents are also reported by workers and appear to be very common:

‘I saw some cans in the other side of the street and decided to pick them. So, when I was crossing the street, I did not look both sides to see if a car was coming... But a motorbike was passing. So I pass between the busses and did not see the bike, which pick me, throwing me in the direction of the buss. The bike ran over me.’ (FG3)

‘And this is what happened... the bus almost took the pushcart. The driver stopped and we make him pay ten “reais”.’ (FG3)

Conclusion

According to waste pickers interviewed, they first decide to work with waste picking because of unemployment, criminal antecedents and/or drug abuse. Waste picking is their only possibility of inclusion in the social system, so that the discrimination and social image around the waste pickers figure seem natural. Discrimination is related to the job but appears in the waste pickers' own discourse, as if they were only good at this kind of occupation. Probably as a defense mechanism, they show some proud to belong to the lower class of the social system, without any possibility of ascending to a better living and working situation, and announce their condition of "autonomy" as the best part of their jobs.

The costs involved in this kind of work are not restricted to issues related to physical health, but reflects questions of social inclusion/exclusion and the stigma of working with the society garbage.

Waste pickers, in general, are perceived as tramps, confounded with dirt: men and women of the streets, disposable pieces of the social system (Adametes, 2004; Medina, 2001; Wilson et al, 2006).

The waste picker sees the job as a mean of survival, even the associated workers. Waste pickers that consider the associative work as a true way of social and political participation are very rare.

Associations provide protection, solidarity and recognition and are a defense against deposit owners, but are not perceived and do not constitute a true model for social inclusion and participation.

Although experiences of waste pickers' associations in the south of the country have been carried out with relative success and are considered a good example of partnership with local governments and a way of promoting social inclusion (Martins, 2005), the transposition of this idea to the northeast of the country, where workers and population are less oriented towards ecological issues and poverty is much more widespread, will probably not succeed in the same degree. Authorities and NGO have to pay attention to the fact that the management of any workers' cooperative requires some level of administrative skills that the workers alone, in Fortaleza, do not have. An

effective government and NGO support should include education, donation and maintenance of equipments, as well as supervision and market intervention. Surveillance of deposits is also necessary to guarantee decent working conditions to some extent.

Health problems, besides accidents, are frequent in the workers discourse, showing the precarious conditions of the job and the necessity of special programs focusing this population group, covering education, treatment and prevention of health problems.

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