

Environmental Protection, Work, and Social Inclusion

Formalizing the Recycling of Urban Solid Waste in Buenos Aires

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The changes in the paradigms regarding urban solid waste management that have occurred in the past few decades have led to a reformulation of Argentine social, labor, and environmental policies. In the case of the city of Buenos Aires, the presence of thousands of “informal” recyclers dedicated to the recovery of recyclable materials for their subsistence has given a particular imprint to the design of these policies, the focus of which has been the social inclusion of these workers through the creation of cooperatives. An examination of the assumptions underlying the use of the concept of informality in the development of cooperatives for recycling from 2007 to 2013 shows that they are part of a complex process in which measures for increasing rights and protections are associated with various forms of labor instability.

En las últimas décadas, los cambios en los paradigmas de manejo de residuos sólidos urbanos han dado lugar a una reformulación de las políticas sociales, laborales y ambientales argentinas. En el caso de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, la presencia de miles de recicladores “informales” dedicados a recuperar materiales reciclables para su subsistencia le ha dado un cariz particular al diseño de dichas políticas, las cuales buscan la inclusión social de estos trabajadores a través de la creación de cooperativas. Un análisis de los supuestos que subyacen el uso del concepto de informalidad en el desarrollo de las cooperativas para reciclaje de 2007 a 2013 muestra que son parte de un complejo proceso en el que las medidas para aumentar los derechos y grado de protección de los trabajadores se asocian a diversas formas de inestabilidad laboral.

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The transformations occurring in the global order in the past few decades have led to a major reconfiguration of the labor markets of various nations and imposed new dynamics of social integration characterized by flexibility and instability in the various orders of daily life. In Argentina these processes

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began with the installation of the military dictatorship in 1976, which led to the imposition of a new model of accumulation based on neoliberal principles whose consequences were felt especially strongly by the end of the 1990s. In that decade informal employment increased and formal employment underwent major change as a result of the prevailing framework of labor flexibility. This situation contributed to a broad transformation of the labor market marked by intense deterioration of living conditions (Beccaria and Maurizio, 2005) that was evidenced in part by a decline in employment and a reduction of almost 25 percent in real wages in the 1976–2001 period (Schorr, 2012).

The changes in the economic model implemented from 2003 on led to high annual rates of sustained growth and the creation of approximately 5 million jobs. Between 2003 and 2013 the gross domestic product (GDP) grew on average by 6.2 percent annually, and the unemployment rate went from 19.7 percent in the last trimester of 2003 to 6.9 percent in the same period of 2014 as real wages recovered from the decline experienced during the previous phase of the deterioration of the labor market (Abeles, 2009). Furthermore, the increase in employment was dependent on an increase in the number of registered jobs, contributing to a decrease in informal employment from 50 percent in 2002 to 35.5 percent in the last trimester of 2012 according to the National Institute of Statistics and the Census. For this reason, even though the levels of employment notably improved in the period from 2003 to 2013, informal employment continued to be high and has not returned to the levels recorded at the beginning of the 1990s.

In this context, at the end of the past century one began to observe significant and sustained growth of labor organizations formalized as cooperatives as a way of regularizing their activities and allowing them access to resources from the private as well as the public sector. Some of them emerged from the organization of “informal,” “precarious,” or “unemployed” workers to improve their living conditions and income through self-employment, as in the case of the recovered factories or the recyclers’ cooperatives. Others resulted from the implementation of state programs dedicated to creating self-employment for the purpose of creating “genuine” occupations for the “vulnerable” population (Ciolli, 2013). Around the 1970s, the pursuit of new conceptual frameworks for the new features of the labor market, the economic strategies of those who were outside the formal market, and the linkages between the two sectors gave rise to the concept of informality. Debates on informality in Latin America can be framed, in general, in terms of three positions (Neffa, 2010):

1. The focus of the Regional Employment Program for Latin America and the Caribbean, which, within the framework of the International Labor Organization (ILO), coined the term “informal urban sector” to identify the range of low-productivity activities engaged in by the population that cannot be absorbed by occupations in the modern sector of the economy.
2. The focus of neoliberalism, which viewed informality as a concept for understanding the characteristics of economic activities rather than individuals. It defined activities as informal because they were illegal, arguing that the situation was the result of a rational choice by subjects seeking to avoid state intervention in order to increase their incomes (de Soto, Ghersi, and Ghibellini, 1987). Therefore, it located the causes of informality in

excessive regulation, concluding that state intervention was an obstacle to the full development of the free entrepreneurial spirit that guided those participating in the informal sector.

3. The neo-Marxist focus, which, seeking to broaden the concept of informality and separate it from the idea of poverty, started by considering it the result not only of the incapacity of the system to absorb the whole population but also of the global restructuring of the capitalist system. It defined informality as “profitable activities that are not regulated by the state in social environments in which similar activities are regulated” (Castells and Portes, 1989: 12). For its part, the ILO, considering the diversity of situations that fall under the concept of informality and its meaning in developed and developing countries, has since 2002 used “informal economy” to refer to activities of workers and economic units that, by law or in practice, are not covered (or are insufficiently covered) by formal arrangements (Williams and Lansky, 2013).

The concept of informality has been extensively utilized in the social sciences to analyze various economic and labor processes. Among them is the recycling of urban solid waste¹ for either resale or disposal at waste sites. This activity has been framed as an expression of informality by highlighting its falling outside of existing regulations in a given context, requiring a low level of capitalization, and being small-scale, low-technology, low-productivity, and easy to enter and leave (Fajn, 2002; Saraví, 1994).

In the Argentine case, this activity has a decades-long history. Nevertheless, it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that it was legally recognized as a form of work whose usefulness was not only social but also environmental. In the case of the city of Buenos Aires, these regulations—a product of debates on the appropriate model for waste management—promoted the formalization of the recyclers² and their subsequent incorporation into the public system of sanitation by organizing them into cooperatives. This path signified a departure in notions of this activity, going from criminalization to legal recognition and, subsequently, partial incorporation into local environmental policy. Thus, and in line with the policies implemented in other South American nations, the management of urban solid waste has been closely linked to the development of policies for the social and economic inclusion of “informal” waste recyclers (Bortoli, 2009; Francisconi Gutiérrez and Zanin, 2011) that in Buenos Aires have had cooperativization as one of their principal pillars.

Within this framework, this study examines the tensions involved in the use of the concept of informality in regulating recycling in the city of Buenos Aires by analyzing the design of environmental policies centered on the social inclusion of the informal recyclers, the forms of regularization of these workers, and the use of the cooperative model as a strategy for their formalization. I will focus on an analysis of the speeches, practices, and stances of the principal actors that have participated in the creation of the regulations concerning environmental issues in the city—the recyclers and their organizations and the municipal government—during the 2007–2013 period. I will emphasize the bidding procedures for the management of dry solid waste entered into after 2008 and the resulting signing of contracts between the city government and 13 recycling cooperatives in January of 2013.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis that follows is part of a research project based on a study of this case. It adopts a holistic approach employing multiple sources of data that allows the identification of emergent or implicit properties in the life of organizations, especially those undergoing transformation (Noor, 2008). The case has been identified in terms of the norms concerning the organization of cooperatives contained in Laws 992 and 1854 of the city of Buenos Aires. Within this framework I attempt to account for the conflicts that arose regarding the appropriate way of managing the city's waste, the different types of organization and management emerging among the recyclers, and the changes in local public policy from 2007 to 2013.

The secondary sources of information were books and reports, especially those of the Single Registry of Urban Recyclers³ and those of the United Nations Children's Fund and the city government. The primary sources included a survey undertaken on the socio-demographic aspects of 78 recyclers in 2010–2011. The results were controlled by the data contained in the above-mentioned recyclers' registry, which were closely correlated. I also observed the daily activities in the organizations' workplaces and the interactions between members of these organizations with regard to work regulations. These observations permitted access to the symbolic universe of the persons who established the relationships I was studying (Johnson, Avenarius, and Weatherford, 2006; Wolfinger, 2002). Finally, I conducted in-depth interviews with members of the organizations and their representatives (delegates and members of the board of directors), public employees and functionaries, representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), purchasers of recyclables, and others. My objective was the reconstruction of the meanings that the subjects gave to their actions, the capturing "in-depth" of everything that they wanted to communicate (Taylor and Bodgan, 1996). The selection of the interviewees was accomplished by targeted sampling (Patton, 2005; Pla, 1999). The interviews and observations were conducted between 2007 and 2013.

FORMALIZING THE RECYCLING OF URBAN SOLID WASTE IN THE CITY

The city of Buenos Aires is the capital of Argentina and the most populous urban center in the country. The last census (2010) counted a total population of 2,890,151 inhabitants in the city and 12,806,866 inhabitants in the urban metropolis of Greater Buenos Aires.⁴ This city has one of the better qualities of life in Latin America, with a per capita income that is the third-highest in the region. The principal economic activities of the nation are concentrated there, and therefore it generates a large proportion of the country's urban solid waste: on average, a kilo of waste per inhabitant per day, a total of 6,000 tons per month. The official figures of the Metropolitan Area State-Society Ecological Committee show that of the total amount of waste sent to landfill sites in 2010–2011, 40 percent could potentially be recycled (17 percent paper and cardboard products, 19 percent plastic, 3 percent glass, and 1 percent metals) (CEAMSE, 2011).

The first demands for the formalization of informal waste recycling emerged at the beginning of the past decade in a context in which recycling had notably increased in the nation's principal urban centers, a product of the unemployment crisis and poverty that the country was experiencing. The only official data available on the number of workers employed in this activity were provided by the recyclers' registry in 2008, when 15,526 individuals were enrolled.⁵ My interviews suggest that some 9,000 recyclers, 3,000 of them associated with cooperatives, were engaged in this activity in 2012. The data from my surveys and those from the registry show that the majority of the workers (70 percent) were male. The great majority of my interviewees represented the second generation participating in informal activities, and this and their ages (the majority under 30) suggested that being a recycler was not only a response to unemployment but for many young people also their first work experience. The lack of other resources, principally not only because of their low educational levels (60 percent had barely reached elementary-school level and only half had completed it) but also because of their lack of contact networks, affected their possibilities of access to the formal labor market.

The situation becomes more complicated when one takes into consideration that before formalization these workers had no access to social security, which created a situation of great instability and an incapacity to plan for the future. At the same time, more than half of them were the principal supporters of their households and the rest were members of households whose principal income came from informal and precarious jobs. Furthermore, in the vast majority of cases their incomes were below the minimum wage and subsidized by benefits from social programs and nonmonetary resources.

One of the major characteristics of this type of employment is its high risk: those who perform it are exposed daily to situations that threaten their health and their physical well-being. Furthermore, the enormous physical exertion of pushing a heavy cart also means the risk of suffering of all types of bone, joint, and muscle damage (the average length of the daily rounds is 5.4 kilometers, and the average weight that is transported on a normal workday is 137 kilograms).

The daily round of the recyclers includes not only the city blocks that they traverse during the collection of recyclables but also those that they walk to and from home. Eighty-two percent of interviewees said that they maintained the same route every workday as a result of the networks that they had established with merchants, neighbors, and building caretakers who provided them with materials. Three-quarters of my interviewees maintained stable relationships with those they called their "clients," with an average of five clients per recycler. Among them building caretakers appeared to be the principal providers for the majority of recyclers. This relationship depended not only on the consistency of the recycler but, fundamentally, on the client's willingness to deliver the recyclable materials. In this sense, an asymmetrical relationship was created in which the one who received had a difficult time reciprocating.

At the same time, the process of reindustrialization has given new value to the recycling process by increasing the demand for certain consumables such as plastics and paper,⁶ transforming the recyclers into central rather than marginal actors in value chains in which businesses characterized by high levels of

formality and productivity participate (Villanova, 2012). There are three major actors in these chains: the recyclers, the warehouses that serve as intermediaries, and the industries. The last link of these is in the formal sector, and some of these industries are monopolies that fix the market price of the materials, regulate the demand, and therefore determine the profit margin for the rest of the actors (Angélico and Maldovan, 2008).

Among other factors, the establishment of the market for recyclables at the beginning of the past decade involved new disputes over the way to manage the city's waste and demands centered on the various actors in the chain. The recyclers' demand for formalization was linked to the disparate interests of various sectors pursuing local government intervention. For the city's residents the demand for formalization was linked to the necessity of ordering public space in terms of sanitation and security. For the businesses responsible for providing local urban sanitation services, the demand for formalization was a defense of their economic interests, which were affected by the scarcity of recyclable waste materials as a result of their informal collection.⁷

During these years the organization of the recycling sector was more or less developing: at the beginning of the 2000s there were only a few organizations, with about 50 workers each, that were registered and only a limited number pursuing formalization under the cooperative structure (Paiva, 2007). Nevertheless, these first organized groups—allied with movements and organizations that supported their demands—began to discuss the legalization of the work as a first step toward what in later years would be understood as an acknowledgment of the recyclers as “urban collectors” within the framework of an activity that Law 992 of 2002 had declared a public service.

In a context permeated by social, political, economic, and environmental conflict the regulations that reoriented the management of urban solid waste in the city were initiated. Law 992 repealed the local ordinance that had prohibited the collection of recyclable waste from public streets and established the designation of “urban collectors” for the recyclers. The legal recognition of the recyclers was a first step toward establishing the rights and obligations of the parties (recyclers and the state) and marked a redirection of the city's environmental policies with regard to these workers. In 2005 Law 1854/2005 (“Zero Garbage”) established a new form of management of urban solid waste aimed at the gradual abandonment of the burial of waste. Under this new framework, recyclers' cooperatives acquired a central position with regard to the management of the centers for classifying and commercializing recyclables (named “green centers”). This was an advance toward consolidating the position of the recycling organizations in the urban sanitation system while maintaining the previous recognition of them as environmental policy workers.

ISSUES IN THE FORMALIZATION OF WASTE COLLECTION

Among the issues that emerged from the discussion of formalization was the design of the city's environmental policy, which focused on the linkage of two perspectives: the one established by international conventions, guided by the 3Rs paradigm (reduce, reuse, and recycle),⁸ and that of the recyclers. As has

happened in other nations in the region (Colombia, Brazil, and Uruguay are representative), the direction of environmental policies has been permeated by a social issue that arises from the fact that environmental goals cannot be uncoupled from the fact that it is ultimately these workers who have been responsible for reducing the amount of urban solid waste sent to the dump.⁹

A second issue was the necessity of granting rights to the recyclers, which required first recognizing them as such and then organizing not only their practices with regard to waste collection but also their behavior as they traversed the city. The initial laws established the rules for working in the city (registering as urban waste collectors, carrying an enabling document, not drinking alcohol or ingesting other substances while collecting, not ripping the waste bags, etc.) and the penalties for breaking these rules (surrendering their licenses, having their carts and the waste collected confiscated). This first regulation went hand in hand with the gradual distribution of state resources to those workers. Some of the recyclers' organizations that emerged in the 2000s were intended to reduce the number of intermediaries in order to improve sales for workers. These cooperatives, of which there were 13 in the metropolitan area with an average of 20 members each in 2007, became part of the operation of the city's green centers. Other organizations emerged from a conflict occurring around the forms of access to the city, when trucks transporting workers from the southern neighborhoods of the area and vans delivering them to subway stations were prohibited from entering. These conflicts had their turning point the following year when, after demonstrations and protest actions, the city government agreed to provide logistical service for recyclers' organizations, thereby promoting the sector's cooperativization. These first accords between the state and the organizations formed the basis on which the obligations and rights of these workers would develop.

Finally, a third issue was what kind of organization would order the distribution of resources stipulated by environmental policy. Cooperativism was the strategy chosen for achieving more access to resources not only for recyclers but also for the local government, decoupling it from the economic and operational costs of organizing the sector and thereby turning it into an actor within the urban sanitation system. At the same time, the use of the cooperative form was in line with the idea of developing the social economy as a strategy for promoting the inclusion of sectors that had been excluded from the formal labor market (Grassi, 2012).

It was these three main issues that dominated the development of the bidding process for the city's urban sanitation service. Some five years later the process resulted in the signing of contracts between the city government and the 13 recyclers' cooperatives—the majority already working in the area—that since then have been in charge of the management of the city's dry solid waste.

FROM RECOGNITION TO PROFESSIONALIZATION: DESIGNING THE DOCUMENTS FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF DRY SOLID WASTE

The first debates over the documents for the management of waste in the city began in 2008, the year that the bidding ended and the exclusive provision of

service had been granted to a group of businesses. The first version of the documents referenced only the management of wet waste, as the management of dry waste was to be spelled out in a separate document designed for the cooperatives. In the words of the Juan Pablo Piccardo, minister of the environment and public space, the new system would focus on the following benefits and obligations (City of Buenos Aires, 2008b):

The benefits are that they will have social security and incentives, among them sanitation, because we believe that the urban recyclers themselves will help us in maintaining a cleaner city. Furthermore, there is also going to be a series of obligations that they will have to comply with, such as not ripping the bags on the streets, not sorting on street corners or in the street, not using child labor, wearing uniforms, and respecting the hours established for the differentiated waste collection system. We are also going to have a system of rewards and punishments for every block or area that is clean, since we are going to know exactly who the recycler or organization is that is responsible for it.

Therefore, while the plan for dry waste was still not drafted, the basis for distributing the resources, rights, and obligations of each part had begun to be outlined and had adopted some of the dispositions that had resolved the previous conflicts. "Not ripping bags" and "no sorting in the street" pointed toward maintaining land-use management regarding urban sanitation, while prohibiting child labor, wearing uniforms, and respecting the hours established by the differentiated waste collection system were all directed toward regulating this labor sector. Two major differences appeared at this time that would be crystallized in the subsequent drafts. The first referred to the benefits to which the recyclers would have access. While previously the basis for the regulation of social conflict had been an agreement in which the waste recyclers had been able to obtain the "right to work in the city" (Maldovan Bonelli, 2014) and later some groups had had access to other types of resources, now the goal was extending these benefits to, as Piccardo specified, the "4,800 individuals who have created their own system of organization, which is truly effective in achieving their goals, since they collect 600 tons of waste per day" (City of Buenos Aires, 2008b). These benefits included logistical service for the movement of their carts, the management of collecting and sorting facilities by the city government, a monthly monetary incentive, work uniforms, and collection bags. The second difference was related to organizing the sector into work cooperatives as a means for accessing these benefits, which meant, according to Piccardo, that the recyclers "have to be ordered to organize themselves and give this system more power. . . . This clearly means that we must give them the same conditions as if they were employed formally in terms of social security, uniforms, responsibilities, agreements, contracts, etc." (City of Buenos Aires, 2008b). Cooperativization became the means of organizing these workers for access to social benefits and also provided more control over individual and collective activities that would allow identification of exactly which waste recycler or organization was responsible for a particular area.

During the meetings of the Buenos Aires legislature in September and October of that year, the city's social, cooperative, and union organizations sought to participate in the bidding in order to be recognized not only as workers but as

workers capable of managing dry waste as a result of the expertise acquired in almost a decade of recycling. Cristina Lescano, president of the El Ceibo Cooperative, took this position (City of Buenos Aires, 2008a):

Our El Ceibo Cooperative has been a specialist in community relations for nine years. Look, we are professionals: we moved from being individual scavengers rummaging through garbage bags to professionals. . . . We want to be paid for the work that we do on the same terms as the companies, because up until now we have been doing it totally for free. . . . How is our work not going to be informal if all those who were here and many who are still in this hall continue to be the poor little scavengers? To these gentlemen we say, "The poor little scavengers grew up and learned. . . . Do not put us in the same league with the wise guys or the darkies as if we knew nothing. We can show all of you many things. We are available to all of you. What you don't understand we can explain to you, even the simplest things, without wasting as much money as is spent on campaigns."

The political and organizational trajectory established by the first organizations empowered their members to consider themselves not as "poor little scavengers" but as "professionals." The establishment of areas of communication within and between organizations created an opportunity for reflection, debate, solidarity, and mutual support, reinforcing the material, technical, social, and political possibilities and capabilities of the sector. The opposition between the "scavenger" and the "professional" permits the social valorization of the job, and formalization, understood as state recognition, presents itself as a form of capital that allows improvement of the position of that work in that context. Vanesa, an organizer with the Urban Collectors of the West Cooperative, told me that until a few years ago people saw recyclers as "drunks, thieves, like dirt" and that that view had changed drastically (interview, Buenos Aires, July 11, 2011). The turning point for this change was simply the wearing of uniforms, since it not only meant adherence to a code of conduct but also symbolized a certificate of good conduct bestowed by the state. In fact, the work conducted did not differ substantively, nor did the individuals performing it; what had changed was the social value given to these individuals and their work.

This appreciation for the formal, the regulated, and submission to control by the state is not simply a matter of common sense. It is also linked to the recognition that the reason for people's not being formally employed is that they lack the opportunity to do so. In this concrete case what mediated between formality and informality was simply political will. Hundreds of workers who might have been considered unemployable adapted to the rhythm of a job—to the hours and codes of conduct that are expected in any job but in addition to mechanisms of control much more extensive and intensive than in any factory: any citizen can potentially denounce any misconduct on the part of a uniformed waste collector traversing the city. The wearing of uniforms constitutes a symbolic repositioning, a form of distinction, that permits one to separate the waste recyclers from the category of "thieves, drunks, and criminals" and recognize them as workers capable of managing urban solid waste in the city of Buenos Aires. This repositioning of the waste recyclers' cooperatives opened the field to a new type of "struggle" in which the different organizations,

besides seeking legal recognition, also sought payment for their work “in the same manner as in a company.”

Finally, the document concerning the management of dry solid waste came under the exclusive bidding of the city’s waste recyclers’ cooperatives, with the city government promising to provide a series of services and benefits to the organizations in exchange for their fulfilling their projected obligations. In the editing and subsequent approval of the draft the cooperatives contributed their ideas on management, debated making the rights obtained permanent, and proposed new benefits.

The first public presentation for discussing this new document occurred on July 27, 2010, in the city’s Sarmiento Theater. Various speakers from a group of cooperatives that participated opened the discussion by presenting what they believed was the most significant change in the bidding when they mentioned, as Maria Ramis, treasurer of the Cooperative of the West, related, that the importance of this draft was recyclers’ “moving from being objects to being subjects and from being spectators to being agents of history” (City of Buenos Aires, 2010). Damian Moreira, leader of the Urban Collectors of the West Cooperative, added that “for the first time we are recognized as workers. We waste recyclers have ceased being simple waste collectors. We are recognized as workers” (City of Buenos Aires, 2010). This was a qualitative leap with regard to the rights and obligations of the city’s organizations, giving them, in the words of Reynaldo Portillo, a member of the Recycling Dreams Cooperative, “an importance in accord with the key role that they play in the management of the dry urban solid waste” (City of Buenos Aires, 2010).

THE NEW DOCUMENTS: DISTRIBUTING RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS

The new draft of the documents included the following provisions: (1) door-to-door collection of dry urban solid waste and its transport to green centers or similarly designated establishments; (2) the separation of all the dry urban solid waste in a green center and its subsequent disposal; (3) training for cooperative members; (4) inclusion of individual urban collectors who were providing the service on their own accounts; (5) implementation of media policies to raise awareness in the community about the benefits of source separation and recycling; and (6) implementation of policies for eradicating unlicensed work, unhealthy work, and child labor. The principal negotiations and discussions focused on identifying the obligations of the contracting parties. Initially the organizations were to be responsible for designing and executing policies in the last three of the above-mentioned areas (inclusion of individual waste recyclers, raising awareness in the community, and eliminating unlicensed and unhealthy work and child labor). Thus they would have been performing functions like those previously performed by the Labor Ministry and law enforcement. They would have been fined for not fulfilling some of these duties and could have lost their benefits for incurring too many fines in a year. This would have placed them in a position of great vulnerability vis-à-vis the control board, whose responsibilities with regard to these situations had not been stipulated.

Regulation via the cooperativization of the sector was a means by which the state could divest itself of its responsibilities, outsourcing them to the waste recyclers' organizations. As Damian Moreira explained (City of Buenos Aires, 2010),

The document states that we should be responsible for some things. The government is on the sidelines, because it is as if they told us, "I give you this place, fix it yourself." It should not be like this. We need a little more assistance and support for the comrades. There is no talk of a budget. We want a budget that is in accord with the document. These are the concerns we have. We do not want to police our own comrades because we need to protect our bins. This means, at times, fighting with our comrades.

The conflict, therefore, was between the state's view, in which the waste recyclers were to make and execute policy, and that of a majority of the organizations, which demanded public policies and more assistance from the government. The principle of social inclusion established in the document was understood by the government as stemming from the logic of outsourcing and labor flexibility, with inclusion achieved on the side. It would grant a limited amount of resources and free the organizations in the sense of Damian's "I give you this place, fix it yourself." This was a logic that, in the medium term, might have led to the failure of the management of resources or an increase in conflict between groups of waste recyclers over access to resources, given that, as Cristina Lescano pointed out, "No one is going to abandon his hard-won customers" (City of Buenos Aires, 2010). Giving the organizations control over independent waste recyclers would have meant requiring them to be "policemen over their own comrades." As Maria Ramis put it, not specifying who would be responsible for "control and regulation or the guidelines for inclusion would lead to a fight of the poor against the poor" (City of Buenos Aires, 2010).

This was because, even though the process of cooperativization had come to include some 3,000 waste recyclers by 2013, a significant number of these workers continued to work independently. Since the income of an organization depended to some extent on the resources it had available for distribution (for example, the ability to charge a fixed monthly fee or access to vehicles adapted to transporting carts), belonging to a cooperative represented a major advantage over working independently. Furthermore, this availability of resources was strongly linked to the political capacity of these organizations to gain access to more resources from the government and thus increase their membership. Finally, the income of a cooperative was also linked to the networks that members had established over many years, which enabled them to ensure that when new collection areas were formed they and not others would occupy them.

Damian also mentioned what the recyclers considered the second focus of the negotiations—exclusive rights by area and the failure to recognize the precedence of these organizations and the rights conferred on them. The fact that the draft did not mention a budget, truck service for transporting carts, or monetary incentives was related to the same dynamic of labor flexibility that I have mentioned and was the third focus that I identified.

To that effect, Article 6 of the draft document mentioned that "in consideration of the services that are granted, the city government will allow the

cooperatives to dispose of the dry urban solid waste, permitting them to profit from the corresponding economic benefit" (Sistema de Higiene Urbana, 2010: 9). This was one of the central points of the demands during the meeting and subsequent negotiations, but it did not produce an agreement that included funding for the cooperatives. Two issues overlapped in this debate: the necessity of covering operational costs with cash and not with waste products as the draft proposed and the issue, raised by Cristina Lescano in the public hearings, "that if five guys manage the subject of paper, cardboard, glass, and the rest, they reduce the material" (City of Buenos Aires, 2010). The high volatility of the market for recyclable materials and the strong dependence on seasonal cycles for prices that, at the same time, are established by those most invested in the chain requires that the cooperatives constantly adapt to these variations and generate mechanisms to guarantee their economic sustainability. Lack of cash for operational costs would have placed the organizations in a precarious situation. Furthermore, while one of the objectives of the new draft was to respond to the demands of the reduction of recyclable materials destined for dumping as established by the goal of zero trash, it was difficult to accomplish because, as Maria Ramis said (City of Buenos Aires, 2010),

With this system of payment of operating costs, one cannot fulfill the objectives of Law 1854, since the urban collectors collect only the material that is guaranteed. Now there are very few who collect film, Styrofoam, bottles, and various types of materials because it is not profitable. If we take into account the cost-benefit relationship—that is, space in the cart and weight in the cart in relation to cash to cover the basic necessities of our families—we prioritize our families.

The development of an environmental policy in which the collection of urban solid waste is centered on management by cooperatives requires the creation of a mechanism that permits one to circumvent the tension between the profitability of recycling (which varies widely for the various materials) and the requirement of promoting the collection of waste that has little market value. This tension is intensifying in the case of the recyclers, whose cost-benefit relationship is expressed in terms of the work effort that emerges from the relationship between "space in the cart and weight in the cart" and the income that makes it possible to cover the basic needs of their families. The inaction of the state with regard to the formalization of the majority of recyclers limits the opportunities of recyclers' organizations to guarantee stability of income. If this situation persists, the possibility of developing an effective environmental policy will be hindered by the significance of the differential value of the various materials for the subsistence of the families of waste recyclers.

Aside from the absence of a response on the demand for equality between private companies and cooperatives, the negotiations produced a number of achievements that improved the position of the waste recyclers' organizations. The city government agreed (Article 33) to assume responsibility for the following programs: (1) an efficient delivery service and free passes for public transportation to every urban recycler and at least one free fully equipped truck for each collection zone; (2) the suppression of child labor and the construction and maintenance of a day-care center for every functioning green center; (3) guaranteed access of all members to the social single tax,¹⁰ individual accident

insurance, uniforms and personal grooming accessories, and job security; (4) monthly incentives supporting the quotas obtained and increasing them as membership increases; and (5) guaranteed maintenance, security, and administration of the green centers and the transport of wet waste to the transfer stations managed by the CEAMSE.

Thus, at least the cooperatives have been able to increase the benefits and resources that they receive and establish a higher level of co-responsibility. While in the original proposal the cooperatives were in a position of extreme vulnerability, after the public hearings and the pressure exercised by the urban recyclers' organizations the situation changed. This demonstrates how the formalization of the recyclers through establishing cooperatives has regulated the practices of the recyclers' sector and contained social conflict. Through the distribution of resources, it has been able to guarantee a level of stability in terms of the discourse of "social inclusion." This does not, however, mean that the new range of resources that the environmental policy has granted the collectors has not improved their working conditions and their daily lives. On the contrary, as I have shown elsewhere (Maldovan Bonelli, 2012; 2014), the increased access to resources provided by the local government in the past few years has meant a significant improvement in those conditions and more favorable circumstances for social change in a sector that was extremely backward.

CONCLUSIONS

The formalization of the collection of urban solid waste in Buenos Aires was presented as a way of, if not resolving, at least organizing the conflicts that emerged as a result of the thousands of recyclers and the diversity of actors involved in the daily management of the city of Buenos Aires—conflicts that had not been resolved through repressive measures, of which there had been many. The increasing organization of the recyclers was what permitted them to advance in acquiring rights and resources and a better position regarding environmental policy. This repositioning meant, among other things, access to benefits that allowed the organized recyclers to better their working conditions. The ILO has estimated that in 2010 labor informality in all occupational categories, both rural and urban, in Argentina was 44 percent. Among salaried workers (73.5 percent of those employed) it was around 38 percent, while among independent workers, the category that includes the recyclers (24.7 percent of the employed) it was 58 percent (Bertranou and Casanova, 2014).

The promotion of organization among the recyclers, their formalization through cooperativization, and their incorporation into the local urban sanitation system through the development of regulations associated with environmental policies are just a few examples of the complexity of this process. This complexity highlights the obstacles presented by the conceptual pairing of formal/informal in giving an account of the links between the actors in the recycling production chain. In the first place, while many of the recyclers' organizations can be seen as part of the informal economy as described in the literature, this leaves aside one of the most important dimensions of these experiments: the linkages among members and between them and other public

and private movements and institutions. In the second place, while many of the city's recyclers are members of cooperatives, others continue to work independently. Even within the organizations, the concept of cooperative work is complicated in practice given the traditional self-employment character of recycling. In the case of Buenos Aires, added to this heterogeneity is the way in which the recyclers were incorporated into the framework of environmental policy, which clashes with the classical view of salaried work (de la Garza, 2013). With the explicit goal of socio-occupational inclusion, it is expressed in forms of alternative work that stress labor flexibility and discipline and promote social and economic self-management as a means of gaining access to social security, among other labor rights. In the third place, because the productive recycling chain is characterized by significant heterogeneity in levels of formalization, with the smallest actors (from recyclers to various brokers) usually not registered in the fiscal regime or in social security while the larger enterprises (such as recycling industries or suppliers of recyclable inputs for their production) are usually registered and have major requirements for the establishment of commercial partnerships.

The forms assumed by the formalization of recycling and recyclers have raised other questions regarding the type of rights, protections, and benefits promoted among these workers. This analysis has sought to clarify the background and achievements of this complex process, which includes mechanisms for expanding protections and guidelines that reinforce labor insecurity, at least in the first link of the recycling production cycle.

NOTES

1. Urban solid waste is waste produced in an urban environment as a result of consumption and the development of human activities and normally takes the form of room-temperature solids. Besides solids produced by commercial, industrial, and residential uses and by the cleaning of public spaces, it includes those that originate in health establishments provided that they are not toxic or hazardous (Gaggero and Ordoñez, n.d.).

2. Also known as "scavengers" or "ragpickers." The term "scavenger" is the term used by the workers themselves. According to my survey, cardboard and paper are the materials that are favored by the majority (91 percent and 85.9 percent, respectively) with an average of 79 and 52 kilos collected daily, respectively, followed by polyethylene terephthalate (PET) (64.1 percent, an average of 19 kilos), copper (59 percent, an average of 2.4 kilos), glass (35.9 percent, an average of 39 kilos) and scrap metal (25.9 percent, an average of 85 kilos). The term "recycler" is a reference to the principal work they do (the collection of recyclable materials from public streets), and the term "urban recyclers" is the name used in the city's environmental policies since 2002.

3. The creation of the registry resulted from the fines contained in Law 992. Registration is what permits recyclers access to a license enabling them to operate in the city. The registry contains information on recyclers' principal socio-demographic characteristics, labor projections, and types of work performed.

4. The National Institute of Statistics and the Census defines Greater Buenos Aires as an area of 3,833 square kilometers including the city of Buenos Aires and the 24 surrounding districts.

5. This figure is tentative because individuals are not obliged to resign when they stop working in their chosen activity and because not all those working were registered.

6. With the end of currency convertibility after the 2001 crisis, a new model of accumulation reversed a model based on financial speculation and the dismantling of the production structure. This model was based on the expansion of the productive sectors and on internal consumption and investment (Schorr, 2012). The change increased the prices of inputs used by local industry,

principally paper and cardboard, which led to the necessity of providing incentives for the recyclers as an alternative. Imports of these materials fell by 62 percent in comparison with the first trimester of 2001, and the sale of these materials to the paper industry increased by more than 300 percent during this period (Pescuma et al., 2002). Something similar occurred with plastic.

7. Until 2004 the businesses bidding on urban sanitation services charged by the ton of recycled materials and their final disposal as landfill. The reduction in weight and volume of the materials they handled during those years meant an important reduction in their income. This situation caused friction in the relationship between the influential private industries in charge of waste collection and the local government. A resolution was eventually reached with a 2004 change in the basis of the fee for industries from weight to the area cleaned.

8. The tenets of the Integrated Management of Solid Urban Waste, established at the 1992 Rio Summit and renewed and strengthened at the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, included minimizing waste generation, maximizing reuse and recycling, environmentally friendly technology for elimination, treatment, and disposal of waste (including recovering energy), increasing the reach of waste disposal services, clean and sustainable production and consumption, public education, and community participation in and support of waste management.

9. A 2008 study by the Department of Engineering of the University of Buenos Aires estimated that of the total household solid waste produced daily, recyclers salvaged 10–14 percent (approximately 3,000 tons daily) (Pescuma et al., 2002).

10. The social single tax is a tax category that recognizes the productive, commercial, and service activities undertaken by the socially vulnerable population whose income is less than that of the lowest general single tax category.

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