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Chapter 6

IN THE SHADOW OF THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY

WASTE PICKERS' FORMALIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF A CHANGING RECYCLING ECONOMY IN CARTAGENA, COLOMBIA

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Introduction

Marta Lucía Ramírez, the vice-president of Colombia, took to the floor of the Convention Centre in Cartagena de Indias,¹ Colombia, in May 2019, to launch the ceremony of the signing of the Bolívar Regional Pact for the National Circular Economy Strategy. '*I want to give a special recognition to the recicladora (waste pickers) population*', she proclaimed, in front of a large audience of entrepreneurs, politicians, and representatives of the city's main waste pickers organizations. Her speech was an ode to recycling that incorporates waste pickers into the country's formalization process as *recicladores de oficio* (professional recyclers). This is in the context of the waste pickers movement's decades-long struggle to be incorporated into municipal solid waste management systems. Ramírez stressed the importance of *recicladores'* work, which she defined as 'the backbone of recycling and reuse in the city'² and as such central to the country's new circular economy strategy. For the waste pickers in the room, who had thus far experienced exclusion, displacement and dispossession despite the past policy of inclusive formalization, Ramírez's rhetoric about the new promises of the circular economy rang hollow. In the eyes of the waste pickers, the circular economy strategy gave no guarantee of protection to the waste picker population.

1. Referred to as Cartagena in the text.
2. Fieldnotes, May 2019.

Since 2018, the Colombian government has been implementing a national circular economy (CE) strategy, later agreed at the regional level, proclaiming itself the first in Latin America and a continental leader in the area (Gobierno de Colombia 2019). Directly inspired by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's (EMF) definition of the circular economy, the aims of the Colombian government's CE strategy are to transform production systems from linear to circular models. By pursuing the circularity of materials, the reduction of waste materials through their return to productive cycles has become a new vision for economic development and a solution to meet the challenges of municipal solid waste. The CE strategy builds on existing national policy documents, notably regarding waste management.³ One of the aims is to increase the rate of recycling to 18 per cent by 2030 (Gobierno de Colombia 2019: 8). By giving prominence in the strategy to the separation at source and recycling of waste materials, the government's political commitment to move towards a circular economy model goes hand in hand with an ethical and discursive promise of inclusive recycling (Gobierno de Colombia 2019; Calderón and Rutkowski 2020). The CE strategy builds on the country's existing inclusive recycling policies and formalization process of the *recicladores de oficio* (Gobierno de Colombia 2018). Colombia is considered by some a world pioneer in recognizing and linking waste pickers to formal waste management systems (Tovar 2018; Durand and De Oliveira Neves 2019). The inclusion of waste pickers into waste management schemes has been inscribed in Colombian law since 2011, following a ruling by the Constitutional Court of Colombia legally obliging municipalities across the country to reconsider the role of informal waste pickers (Rateau and Tovar 2019).⁴

This chapter shows how Colombia's CE aspirations clash with its profit-driven waste infrastructure that rewards waste collection and landfilling. In this context, informal waste pickers, whose work aims to recover value from waste and resell it as recyclable material, are not only silenced actors of an actually existing CE but also invent political economies of its possibility. At the same time, despite the rhetoric of waste pickers' inclusion in the CE, the latter represents a continuity with

3. National policy on integrated solid waste management Conpes 3874 of 2016 (Gobierno de Colombia 2018: 4).

4. A transitional regime for the formalization of waste pickers' organizations in the country followed in 2016 with the Decree 596 (Tovar 2018).

historical processes of marginalization, as well as instituting new forms of dispossession.

Colombia's more than 60,000 waste pickers⁵ collect recyclables individually or collectively from streets or buildings that they subsequently sell to intermediary buyers who, in turn, sell them in large quantities to national or global industries. Diverse processes of value-adding by waste pickers precede the recirculation of materials in the economy, enabled by their detailed knowledge of materials, markets, collection routes and waste generators, thus preventing flows of recyclable materials ending up in landfills. The Colombian recyclers' movement takes pride in their role as environmental pioneers, yet despite the Colombian government's political commitment to move towards a circular economy and the ethical promise to place *recicladores* at the centre of these new public policies, similar to other Latin American contexts, waste pickers' grassroots knowledge of circularity (Gutberlet and Carenzo 2020; Carenzo et al. 2022) is not acknowledged and historical processes of dispossession are extended (O'Hare 2021).

This chapter draws on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2021 in the coastal city of Cartagena, Colombia, to explore the situated socio-spatial work of waste pickers in the process of formalization and circular economy policies. Cartagena's urban recycling economy is constituted by flows of materials and is defined by the city's political and socio-spatial relations that read together offer a privileged terrain for attending to the circular economy as historically situated. 'Circular economy' has often been analysed from the standpoint of presumably global economies in a quest for green growth, sustained by policies and frameworks. In this chapter, by engaging with materiality as 'transformation and process' (Kirsch 2013: 439), it is precisely the situated everyday socio-spatial and political struggles surrounding waste pickers' recycling activities that become the starting point for reconsidering where and how circular economies emerge and who takes agency in shaping diverse understandings of circularity in Cartagena. An empirical focus on waste pickers' labour emphasizes their role in circulations of material in the city, resulting in the production of new circularity patterns in ordinary spaces of urban life.

The chapter draws attention to the frictions of the everyday and emphasizes that despite conceiving the work of waste pickers as an

5. According to the National Association of Waste Pickers in 2019 (Parra 2020: 127).

indispensable link in a value chain for the commercialization of recovered materials, the CE strategy acts as a façade concealing existing socio-material enclosures and processes of dispossession. The chapter also sheds light on the circular economy not as a dominant project emanating from green economy agendas but rather as a contested notion that emerges from situated urban settings and is thus always plural and constantly changing. In the first section, this chapter analyses the situated sociopolitical history of waste pickers' dispossession in Cartagena that has defined their struggle to access waste materials. The second section then centres on the complex socio-spatial dimension of dispossession as waste pickers compete to establish collection routes and illustrates how the formalization process reinstates existing power dynamics. The third section turns to waste pickers' interactions with state bureaucracy mediated through the complex administrative requirements and barriers to the formalization process. In the state's attempts to extract economic value from recycling, the chapter shows how imagining waste pickers as 'waste entrepreneurs' allows for new forms of dispossession. In conclusion, the chapter argues that waste pickers' labour sets the frame for negotiating recyclables as circulating socio-materials and thus becomes a crucial practice for the making of diverse circular economies in the city's rapidly changing recycling economy.

*'Recycling without recyclers is rubbish':⁶
From the dumps to the streets*

The discursive acknowledgement of waste pickers' labour in the CE strategy can be read as an effect of the Colombian recyclers movement's legal achievements. Colombia's recyclers movement consolidated through decades of struggle to be recognized in municipal waste management systems after having been previously dispossessed from dumps and streets (Parra 2016; Rosaldo 2019; Tovar 2018). A shift in the mid-1980s and 1990s from open-air dumpsites to sanitary landfills (Calderón Márquez and Rutkowski 2020; Molano 2019; Parra 2020) translated into dump closures and waste pickers' evictions from the surrounding informal settlements, exclusion from landfills,

6. The Colombian recyclers organization's motto is '*Reciclaje sin recicladores es basura*' ('Recycling without recyclers is rubbish').

increased restriction of access to waste materials and criminalization of labour (Rosaldo 2019; Parra 2020). They faced a surge of social hatred which materialized in the appearance of the so-called 'social cleansing squads' (*grupos de limpieza social*), often working with the complicity of the police, and notorious for the murdering of populations they designed as *desechables* (disposable people). During that time, over 2,000 Colombian waste pickers, sex workers and beggars were killed (Rosaldo 2019; Molano 2019). The Barranquilla scandal epitomizes the violence of the '*limpieza social*'. On the 29th of February 1992, in the city of Barranquilla, two waste pickers were attacked and shot at after having been asked to enter the university premises to collect cardboard. One of them managed to escape and report the case to the police. Following the police's intervention, eleven bodies – mainly of waste pickers – were discovered within the university perimeter bringing to light a macabre human organ trafficking scandal. To commemorate the victims, the waste pickers organize the International Waste Pickers Day each first of March (Fieldnotes 17/08/17; Molano 2019). This case and others triggered national protests led by waste pickers in the 1990s, and the pressure on Congress resulted in passing the first national recycler rights legislation (Parra 2016; Rosaldo 2019).

While they were unable to access landfills, waste pickers organized their activity around recovering recyclables from the streets. In response, in 2002, a national decree attempted to transform waste left on the street into the private property of waste management firms. This was no surprise for waste pickers. Since the mid-1990s, city governments have been selling off rights to the recyclable waste to private recycling businesses (Rosaldo 2019). A judicial struggle was led by recyclers' organizations in Bogotá in 2003 to prevent the privatization of garbage (Parra 2016; Tovar 2018; Rosaldo 2016, 2019). In 2008, ex-president Álvaro Uribe's sons launched a private recycling firm competing directly with recyclers, and a law banning informal recycling was passed in Colombia's Congress (Rosaldo 2016, 2019). Waste pickers' further dispossession from the streets led the Colombian recyclers movement to consolidate as a political movement (Rosaldo 2019), targeting changes in national policy (Tovar 2018; Parra 2016; Rosaldo 2016, 2019). In the 2002–8 period, Colombian recyclers demanded not only to be recognized but also to receive fair compensation from the state and the public for their work (Tovar 2018). They won several human rights cases in the Constitutional Court (Rosaldo 2019; Parra 2016) and established

the current inclusive recycling programme and a shift in the waste management paradigm.

In Colombia, the formalization process has given organized informal waste pickers improvements in their incomes and work conditions. Nevertheless, the state's scheme for formalization inscribed in neoliberal governance logics created the possibility for waste pickers' exclusion and marginalization (Tovar 2018; Parra 2020; Rosaldo 2016, 2019; Neville and Tovar 2023). In the context where state actors have an interest in appropriating the spaces and industries occupied by informal waste pickers, this population continues to face structural constraints. In the case of Bogota, Rosaldo (2019) argues that the state adopted 'a more subversive tactic: dispossession through formalisation, couched in the duplicitous language of recycler empowerment' (2) risking undermining the victories achieved by the recyclers' movement.

Waste pickers labour and landfill politics in Cartagena

Waste pickers' labour in Cartagena constitutes a crucial step towards the circularity of recyclable materials at the urban scale. Situating the sociopolitical history of their work in the city sheds light on how existing power dynamics reinstate waste pickers' dispossession despite circular economy and inclusive recycling policies. Embedded in the acts of resistance and collective action of the Colombian recyclers' movement, waste pickers in Cartagena have engaged in a historical socio-spatial and political struggle to access waste materials while facing dump closures and the privatization of waste. The situated context of waste pickers' dispossession in Cartagena can be read in continuity with the processes observed at a national level but also speaks to the city's specific socio-material and political relations. This shows how, in order for waste pickers to become involved in formal circular economy processes, the larger political economies of waste in Colombia and in Cartagena would have had to be reorganized.

In Cartagena, the legacy of coloniality and race and gender dynamics are crucial to understanding the impact of the racialized marginalization and dispossession on waste pickers, a majority of whom are Afro-descendants. Cartagena was founded in 1533 and became one of the major colonial centres of the Spanish Empire in Latin America (Cunin and Rinaudo 2006) and a central location for the transatlantic slave trade (Abello Vives and Florez Bolivar 2015). The city first expanded

inside its fortified walls and through neighbourhoods segregated along a socio-racial hierarchy (Helg 2004). These early histories still define the city's urban map. Meanwhile, the history of racial- and class-based aesthetics of hygiene has sustained spatial divisions, stigma and displacement in the city through urban hygiene projects as well as discourses and representations of urban cleanliness.

In the early 1960s, residents of a self-built settlement next to the municipal open-air dumpsite in the predominantly Afro-descendant San Francisco neighbourhood located at the north-west of the city named the vacant urban lot where they were about to set up their housing with the term *Amboyede*, a vernacular local term referring to distilling unpleasant smells – the word is a contraction of *ambos* (both) and *hieden* (stink) (García Martínez et al. 2008). Residents of the neighbourhood recall that the term *Amboyede* was also used to refer to the waste collection truck workers of the *Empresas Públicas Municipales*, the former municipal waste collection company. These waste workers were predominantly Afro-descendant men, often originating from the surrounding *Palenques* (rural communities of maroons).

In 1969, the open-air dumpsite in San Francisco was closed and transferred to Henequén, a self-built settlement located in the south-western part of Cartagena. The residents followed the dumpsite, taking the name *Amboyede* with them. Thereby, a new *Amboyede* was born, marking the beginning of the city dumpsite's incessant itinerant journeys around the city. Henequén was one of the numerous peripheral neighbourhoods inhabited by a population of *campesinos* (peasants) who arrived as migrants or internally displaced⁷ by the violence of the armed conflict from Afro-descendant territories in the South of Bolívar (Atehortúa and Baena 2015). The residents lived from small-scale agriculture (Atehortúa and Baena 2015) and progressively began to work on the newly arrived dumpsite. 'We are all *'desplazados'*⁸ (internally displaced population), recounted Miguel, an Afro-descendant waste picker and resident of Henequén, emphasizing the displacement as the defining feature of collective biographies.

Landfills and waste in the Global South have become a new commodity frontier and thus a subject of enclosures and dispossession (Fredericks 2021; Hartmann 2012; Millar 2012; Millar 2018; Zapata and Zapata

7. Colombia has a population of 7.3 million internally displaced people, one of the largest in the world (2017, UNHCR).

8. Fieldnotes, February 2019.

Campos 2015; Samson 2015). The landfill politics unfolding in Cartagena since the mid-1990s are evocative of the structural constraints shaping waste pickers' labour in the city. After decades of functioning as the city's main dump and providing a livelihood for the residents of Henequén, the open-air dumpsite was closed in 1994 and replaced by a sanitary landfill in the same neighbourhood, abruptly excluding waste pickers from access inside its perimeter. Waste pickers protested intensely against the ban on entering the landfill and were violently repressed by the police. After collective negotiation with the waste management company in charge of the newly privatized landfill, a small group of Henequén waste pickers organized into cooperatives that were eventually granted access to the landfill. However, the remaining majority moved on to collecting waste on the streets and door-to-door. Despite having reached its capacity, the Henequén landfill continued functioning until 2005, when a twenty-year concession was finally granted to another waste management company to build and run a new landfill located at the outskirts of the city, named *La Lomita*.⁹ Thereafter, waste pickers were formally denied access to *La Lomita*, meaning that even the small cooperatives of waste pickers were now fully reliant on street and door-to-door collection.

This last relocation of the landfill was transformative for the waste management regime in the city. The awarding of the concession for the new landfill was the result of judicial actions and corrupt practices of a powerful entrepreneur, commonly referred to as the 'invisible mayor', who had close ties with paramilitary groups and other criminal bands. In Colombia, the relations between political elites – as well as city mayors – and narco-paramilitaries (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2015, 2019), known as 'parapolítica', are particularly relevant for understanding urban politics. The 'invisible mayor' resorted to a range of shadowy practices that resulted in the brutal closure of the Henequén landfill overnight. During an interview in 2019, a former government official recounted the pressure he was under: 'they were extorting us!' The municipal government was given no time to find a site for waste disposal in the meanwhile. Due to the accumulation of waste on the streets, a sanitary crisis unfolded in the city, and given the urgency of the situation, the landfill was transferred to *La Lomita* in accordance with the invisible mayor's secret plan. The businessman was then able to persuade the municipality to give him a contract to run the new landfill as well as other landfills in the Bolívar department, making the waste infrastructure into an oligopolistic and profit-oriented business. The new landfill operated

9. Pseudonym.

on an economic incentive system determined by the quantity of waste going into the landfill. The system is lucrative both for the company running the landfill and for the two official waste collection companies that haul waste to it. These power dynamics are inextricably bound to the country's history of violence and dispossession, and need to be fully acknowledged when looking at who has appropriate agency in the development of Cartagena's CE strategy.

The overlapping political powers shaping the oligopolistic waste infrastructure are central to understanding the new forms of waste accumulation in Cartagena. For waste pickers, these power relations hamper their inclusion in the waste management system. Noria, a lifelong resident of Henequén, further commented on the political structure and alliances that define waste pickers organizations' possibility of accessing the urban recycling economy; lowering her voice as she referred to the role played by the 'invisible mayor', she added in a whisper: 'Here in Cartagena, the waste pickers' organisations that survive are those that know the territory, the history' (Interview, 17 July 2021).

Racing for the collection routes

With a strong tourist economy and industrial sector, Cartagena is a large generator of recyclable materials, yet their production and value are not consistent across the city. The spatiality of the circulation of recyclable materials is continuously evolving, but its unpredictability is routinized through the labour of waste pickers who salvage materials and devise new patterns of circularity in everyday spaces of urban life. The waste pickers' labour attunes to the constantly changing socio-material relationships within the urban recycling economy. Waste pickers' spatial practices create new forms of circulation of recycle within Cartagena's circular economy. Focusing on the competition for collection routes emerging in the present context of the implementation of recycling policies, this section disentangles waste pickers' dispossession from their routes and the resistance to the quiet encroachments of municipal waste collection companies and private recycling businesses.

Cartagena's 2016–27 new waste management plan (PGIRS)¹⁰ argues for recyclers' integration¹¹ into the official waste management system.

10. *Plan de Gestión Integral De Los Residuos Sólidos* (PGIRS).

11. *Programa de Inclusión de Recicladores*, according to the 2015 decree n°1077.

This policy sets the frame for the implementation of the CE strategy at the municipal level. One of the objectives of the national CE strategy is to continue the work of *recicladores de oficio*'s inclusion while generating new employment arising from CE business models (Gobierno de Colombia 2019). Yet the centrality of the principle of free competition present in these strategies riddles inclusive policy with contradictions and undermines the inclusion and protection of waste pickers (Parra 2020). After decades of state-led waste management until 1985, waste collection was privatized in the second half of the 1980s as part of a broader programme of economic structural adjustment in Colombia. The policy changes brought by the Constitution of 1991 further established neoliberal principles of free competition, affirming that the guiding principle of waste management is profitability (Calderón Márquez and Rutkowski 2020; Parra 2020). The inclusive recycling policies and CE strategy are placed in continuity with the 'free market' principle, opening the door for a multitude of non-waste picker entities, including waste collection companies and private recycling businesses, such as the large French multinational waste management company Veolia, to enter the recycling economy (Durand and De Oliveira Neves 2019). According to Roberto, a long-time *reciclador*, and other waste pickers, Veolia shares part of the blame for the dispossession of waste pickers. Roberto explained that the landfill's existing economic incentive system encourages waste collection companies to bring as much waste as possible into the landfill, a logic that is conflicting with that of waste pickers salvaging and diverting materials from the landfill. Roberto added:

It's the business of the [waste collection] companies to bring more (waste) into the landfill. It's good business (*Es un negocio redondo*). They want *recicladores* to disappear. . . If they stop bringing that material in, they can't charge for it. . . They [the waste collection companies] don't like to have millions taken out of their pockets. It's a mafia. If only it was fair! (*laughs*) (Interview, 25 February 2019)

One method for including waste pickers is through a *tarifa*. The *tarifa* is a unique legal innovation to recognize waste pickers in Latin America, conceived by the Constitutional Court of Colombia (*Resolución 720* of 2015) as a type of affirmative action, entitling formalized waste pickers organizations to receive a portion of the municipal service tax paid by citizens alongside the money they receive in exchange for the collected materials (Parra 2020). The *tarifa* is fixed at the same price as is paid to private companies responsible for the collection, transport and final disposal of waste (Neville and Tovar 2023).

Ruben, a waste picker who has dedicated his whole life to recycling activities in Cartagena, explained to me that he had been facing increased difficulty in maintaining one of his long-standing collection routes in the city's touristic sectors. Ruben defines himself as a *reciclador de oficio* as he has been collecting recyclables from the streets for decades, yet like many, he crosses the boundaries of the fixed roles assigned to waste pickers' labour in the formalization policies by working as a small-scale intermediary buying and reselling materials from other waste pickers in his *bodega*, a small backyard warehouse. His recycling *bodega* is located just by a new *Estación de Clasificación y Aprovechamiento* (ECA), a recycling site dedicated to the weighing, storing and sorting of recyclable materials following strict regulations and environmental authorizations considered a requirement in the formalization process. The ECA was founded via the city's largest plastic industry's Corporate Responsibility Policy, committed to move towards using more recycled plastic in its production. The ECA was deliberately located in a strategic location near a large number of profitable recycling routes in the city's touristic sector and high-income neighbourhoods. Ruben considered this competition disloyal as he argued that the new ECA attracted recyclers by setting higher buying prices compared to his *bodega*. He explained:

They arrived with resources. Here, we don't have resources. . . They installed themselves in the same place as us. They are taking my job away. . . It's unfair competition. They bought cardboard at 200 pesos, then at 600 pesos to draw the attention of the recyclers. For 20 pesos extra a recycler goes elsewhere. . . Free market, this is where the danger is. (Interview, 3 April 2019)

The larger infrastructure of these private recycling firms makes it difficult for small-scale waste pickers organizations to engage in competition. Unlike the majority of waste pickers in Cartagena, who work on foot or with hand-pushed carts, larger private recycling businesses have trucks that allow them to travel longer distances in a shorter period of time and collect larger amounts of recyclables across the city. Ruben further explains how he also faces competition from other private recycling companies that seize his and his waste pickers' collection routes:

The *Tierra*¹² people are the most annoying because they are not *recicladores*. They are in various cities. They report (materials on the

12. Pseudonym given to a recycling firm.

SUI platform) such an incredible amount of materials and you don't even know where it comes from! My recyclers wear green (uniforms), people recognize them, other recyclers collecting here wear blue, and so on. But this company, nobody sees them collecting, no one knows what colour they wear, but they report more (materials) than those of us who are doing the work. . . With the long-established recyclers organisations, those of Henequén for example, we respect each other's sites, we don't collect from each other's clients. But a company like *Tierra* does! (Interview, 3 April 2019)

In Cartagena, recyclers' dispossession from strategic collection routes by larger recycling companies is further accentuated through the purchase of recyclable materials. According to the national legislation (Decree 596 of 2016), recyclers organizations are required to collect recyclable materials for free, yet in practice larger recycling companies circumvent this legal framework by buying materials at source to secure their exclusive access to it. Pablo, a leader of the city's main recyclers organization, denounced the recycling companies' strategy: 'Here in Cartagena, for example, a company from Medellín displaced us. They offered money for the recyclables. This is against the decree (596 of 2016)!'¹³ (Interview, 13 March 2019).

Consequently, Pablo denounced the implications for waste pickers maintaining their long-standing recycling routes during an internal meeting. To ensure access to recyclables, some recyclers organizations have also begun – in a similar manner to the larger recycling companies but at a smaller scale – to buy materials at source. Pablo further explained how many waste pickers are faced with a dilemma and end up, in turn, circumventing the inclusive recycling legislation designed to protect waste pickers' labour and incomes:

We have to work against Decree 596. If we don't buy (recyclable materials), somebody else buys them. . . Dispossession happens through purchase. . . This is not possible so behind our backs we are passing the cash; this is how it is (*por detrás estamos pasando el billete, así es*). (Fieldnotes, February 2019)

For waste pickers organizations, this practice involves small sums of money, as illustrated during a collection route accompanying a waste picker who paid 2000 Colombian pesos¹³ to the guard of a condominium

13. Approx. 50 cents USD.

to make sure he kept the material for him (Fieldnotes, April 2019). As such, waste appears as increasingly commodified and enclosed, kept behind doors and gates, and for which waste pickers organizations make agreements – monetary or not – to ensure their exclusive access. In Pablo's case, this strategy is feasible as his waste pickers' organization is flourishing, yet this is not possible for the majority of waste pickers in the city.

As pressures grow to seize profitable collection routes, waste becomes scarce and less available on the streets, pushing the less well-off waste pickers off the more lucrative collection routes. Pushed to the edges, waste pickers open new, smaller collection routes in middle-income residential neighbourhoods, allowing new patterns of circularity to emerge across the city. This process was exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic as hotels, bars and restaurants shut down for months and access to condominiums in elite neighbourhoods was prohibited by the police or building guards due to fear of spreading the virus. For Ruben, this meant giving up one of his last recycling collection routes in the touristic district and finding alternative routes in residential neighbourhoods close to where he lives with his family. Nevertheless, these alternative routes did not provide sufficient materials for his waste pickers to make a living. Ruben reported a drop in income of 80 per cent. In some cases, waste pickers were forced out of the recycling economy altogether. While the prevailing narratives in development and policy circles laud formalization as an improvement to waste pickers' livelihoods and environmental sustainability, this partial understanding of waste pickers' labour overshadows its heterogeneity, constant evolution and adaptation that is central in understanding the micro patterns of circularity generated in everyday spaces of urban life.

The economic imagination of formalization

New forms of 'dispossession through formalisation' (Rosaldo 2019) exist in everyday encounters with the state. On the one hand, the complex administrative requirements and digitalization of waste pickers' labour established through the country's formalization process are experienced by waste pickers as an added obstacle on the road to inclusion. On the other hand, existing structures of power and governance in Cartagena undermine the possibility of implementing 'affirmative action' policies recognizing waste pickers' labour in the waste management system.

The formalization process is divided into eight phases through which the *recicladores de oficio*'s organizations must navigate to gradually fulfil the administrative, commercial, financial and technical requirements established by the Ministry of Housing, City and Territory within an eight-year period. The latter starts from the moment waste pickers organizations register with the governments' monitoring system, the *Sistema Único de Información* (SUI).¹⁴ The SUI is an online platform on which waste pickers organizations report the data relative to the amount of recyclable materials collected and weighed. According to the tons of recyclate reported on the SUI, waste pickers should subsequently get paid the *tarifa*. Designed as a tool contributing to the recognition of waste pickers' labour, the SUI platform nevertheless also represents a greater possibility for the state to monitor and generate statistics on the flows of recyclable materials, as well as the means to extract greater revenues from waste work through formal taxation. Similar to the ongoing digitalization of waste pickers' labour, the CE strategy aims to develop further an information system to monitor and measure the progress in the implementation of the strategy (Gobierno de Colombia 2019) whose potential could reach US\$ 11.7 billion in annual material savings and new business opportunities (Gobierno de Colombia 2019: 9).

Negotiating the intricacies of the complex administrative requirements of formalization becomes highly significant for waste pickers' everyday labour and further exacerbates the difficulties of establishing themselves in the recycling economy. Sustained by inclusive recycling policies and the CE strategy, the top-down economic imagining of waste pickers as neoliberal micro-entrepreneurs materializes through waste pickers' day-to-day negotiating of formalization status. Indeed, the legal and administrative requirements for the formalization of waste pickers organizations were designed with the requirements and administrative capacities of formal businesses in mind rather than the informal waste pickers organizations that function mainly as 'solidarity-based economic entities' (Parra 2020: 134).

Ernesto leads one of the numerous recyclers organizations in the city which has been facing the challenges of engaging with the bureaucracy of the formalization process. He has worked in recycling his whole life. As he progressively expanded his collection route, he set up a warehouse to stock his recyclables, which included cardboard, paper, glass and

14. The 2016 decree n°596.

scrap metals, PET and plastic materials, sustaining a living for his family. He witnessed the ebbs and flows of various NGOs' support, as well as the policy changes that brought inclusive recycling across the country. In 2014, a social worker from a local NGO walked into his warehouse and introduced him to the opportunities of the formalization process. In July 2014, after constituting a recycling association, together with the support of an NGO, he carried out a demand for action for the protection of waste pickers' rights, known as an *acción de tutela de primera instancia*, on the mayor's office, claiming their 'fundamental rights to work, human dignity, life with dignity and equality'.¹⁵ With the support of the NGO, he campaigned for the recognition and inclusion of the population of waste pickers and their labour in the city. After winning his case against the municipality, his individual action soon began to grow with the collective support of the city's recently conformed waste pickers organization (Asociación de Recicladores de Cartagena, ARCA) demanding recognition of their work through protests. In return, the municipality granted Ernesto's co-workers uniforms and carts. These 'affirmative actions' fell into place under the pressure of the legal situation rather than out of political goodwill as Ernesto put it: 'it is not because they had the political will (*voluntad política*), they did it because of our demand for action (*tutela*) with the mayor.'

Since then, Ernesto recounts the numerous administrative barriers he had faced to formalize his waste pickers organization. As Ernesto explains, he had to register his association with the *Cámara de Comercio* (Chamber of Commerce) and the *Dirección de Impuestos y Aduanas Nacionales* (National Tax and Customs Department) (DIAN) to pay taxes. He had to regularize the recyclers association's situation by paying overdue taxes of three years and the fines incurred for non-compliance. While he decided, with the help of his son, to pursue the formalization process, hoping to access the remuneration by the *tarifa*, many of his colleagues did not. The difficulties, and at times impossibility, of collecting the necessary documents and archives discouraged many recyclers organizations who continued working informally. Ernesto regrets that most of his colleagues did not engage in the process as it undermined waste pickers' possibility of collective political action in the city.

For Ernesto, navigating the intricacies of the SUI platform also implied having computer literacy, internet access, and infrastructure,

15. As stated in a copy of the 2014 *tutela* provided by Ernesto in 2019.

which he only achieved with the support of his son. The SUI platform represents a barrier for recycler organizations, given the difficulty of reporting the information and the risk of facing high fines in case of errors. Once his situation with the tax office was regularized, sustained by the constant labour of the members of the recycling association and the support of different NGOs, Ernesto's recycling association progressively developed. Today, it is one of the few formalized entities but still does not receive remuneration by the *tarifa*. Unlike Ernesto, other waste pickers organizations were unable to gather the required documents to register the tons of recyclable materials on the government's official SUI platform. To overcome this administrative challenge, a few waste pickers organizations across the city rely on inventive and complex strategies, such as the administrative arrangement to work *in sombrilla* (in umbrella) with other more established recyclers associations to record their recyclables on the SUI and later get paid the corresponding *tarifa*.

According to the national policy changes, the Municipality of Cartagena has the obligation to establish 'affirmative actions' to allow recyclers to enter the solid waste management system and guarantee financial and technical support to recyclers organizations. Ernesto nevertheless remains sceptical about the implementation of the formalization process in the city. Despite the first affirmative action awarded to his organization in 2014, he has witnessed decades of exclusion:

We as *recicladores* have survived because of the strength of will we have to keep going, but not because the state has done anything to help us. . . We started to stick to the objective that these resources (of the city's inclusive recycling policy) would reach the *recicladores* but the state always catches you, misleads you and deceives you. (Interview 2017)

The municipality's official discourse on inclusive recycling does not translate into official budgets, where investments are largely absent, and whatever money there is vanishes before reaching the *recicladores*. During an official meeting in February 2019 between the mayor and a local NGO set up by the recyclers, the *Procuradora Ambiental y Agraria de Bolívar*,¹⁶ the latter denounced the mismanagement of funds at the city

16. Office of the Attorney General for Environmental and Agricultural Affairs.

level and the lack of compliance with regulations by failing to include in the budget the resources needed to execute the waste pickers' inclusion programme as stipulated in the city's new waste management plan (PGIRS). The *Procuradora's* words during the meeting confirmed the claims made a few months earlier by the leaders of the city's main recyclers organization, who collectively walked out of a meeting organized by the municipality to express their discontent with practices of corruption and with the (inexistent) official budgets dedicated to inclusive recycling (Fieldnotes, January 2019). In addition to the structures of power shaping Cartagena's wastescape, the city's urban politics are driven by a volatile political atmosphere. This has caused a rapid mayoral turnover with eleven mayors in the past seven years, and four in 2018 alone. The consequent discontinuity in the city's government policies and short-term programmes hinder the progress of inclusive recycling policies.

Conclusion: Waste pickers' exclusion in the shadow of the circular economy

Despite the appeal of the circular economy's promises of win-win outcomes and green growth (Corvellec, Stowell and Johansson 2022), rethinking 'circularity' from the perspective of the formalization of waste pickers challenges the notion of a unique and hegemonic circular economy. Through an ethnographic exploration of waste pickers' formalization in Cartagena, this chapter foregrounds the everyday practices and politics surrounding recyclers' formalization and points to the nuances and frictions of the political and ethical promises of inclusive recycling. The daily processes of recycling in everyday spaces of the urban economy thus constitute a fruitful starting point for understanding how 'circularity' is articulated with the work of vulnerable economic actors and marginalized populations.

The chapter traces the stories of waste pickers' exclusion, displacement and dispossession starting by historically contextualizing the exclusion of recyclers in Cartagena and the political conflicts over the access and new localization of the city's landfill. Together with these historical processes, more recent effects of neoliberal capitalism located in the intricacies of formalization policies have shaped waste pickers' practices to compete for recycling collection routes as well as their struggle to engage with bureaucracy and government.

The consequences of formalization policies for waste pickers' work illustrate in different ways the complex relations between state policies,

capitalist markets and the situated socio-material relations that become constitutive of urban politics. Rather than establishing a new connection between Cartagena's local recycling economy and a global circular economy, there is a risk that the CE strategy will simply cement the socio-spatial enclosure of recyclable material. The situated dynamics of inclusive recycling policies have not eased waste pickers' connections to city politics and global economies but rather deepened their exclusion. In exploring waste pickers' continuous experiences of dispossession and the spatial consequences for their labour in the city, the chapter further points to the strategies developed in response by waste pickers participating in the city's rapidly changing waste infrastructure. In a context of inclusive recycling policies, understanding of waste pickers' labour and political struggle as a terrain of social relations is forged on their historical marginalization and more recent experiences of 'dispossession through formalisation' (Rosaldo 2019: 2) that remap the geographies of a circular economy in the city.

Waste pickers' work appears to be left behind in the shadow of the promises of the circular economy promoted by the Colombian government. The value reclaimed from recyclable materials becomes increasingly competed for by private recycling businesses and large waste management companies. At the same time, it becomes accounted for by the state for whom the traceability and formal taxation of recyclables becomes a new frontier for accumulation. As the stories of the contentious sociopolitical and spatial struggle of waste pickers in Cartagena to access waste materials and position themselves in the recycling economy make clear, what formalization policies and circular economy discourses have transformed are not the exclusion of disenfranchised population, but rather the forms of dispossessions that are taking place, the possibilities of collective struggle and the relationship to the state.

The work of *recicladores* reinfuses value into discards by providing materials for the recycling industry and recirculating them in the global economy, thus articulating global capitalist economies with situated recycling, consumption and production practices. The Colombian state's ideal and promises of a circular economy, which relies on the formalization of *recicladores*, conceals the contradictions, frictions and limitations encountered at the urban micro-level that blur clear-cut understandings of circularity. In the shadow of circular economy discourses, no further protection for the population of waste pickers is guaranteed, thus raising probing questions about the understanding of the virtuous circularity celebrated in the circular economy.

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