

# Hixon Center for Urban Ecology Student Research Fellows

## Challenges to the Social Inclusion of Trash Pickers a Comparison between Brasilia and Porto Alegre in the Context of Waste Management

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### Problem:

This work compares municipal waste management practices in Porto Alegre and Brasília to examine the professed potential of recycling cooperatives to serve as mechanisms for the social inclusion of trash pickers in Brazil. This question becomes particularly relevant in the developing world where the increase in waste output has become a major pull factor of workers to cities. The conspicuous convergence of poverty and waste in urban areas evidences and exacerbates historical patterns of inequality and constitutes one of the most serious challenges to sustainability and equitable urban development in modern times.

### Background:

The Federal District, home to Brasília, is taking measures to implement an integrated solid waste management program that promotes, among other things, curbside collection of separated recyclables and support for the work of trash pickers through the creation of cooperatives. The city of Porto Alegre in the south of Brazil has had such a recycling program in operation since 1990 and thereby constitutes a valuable frame of reference for the assessment of advances in Brasília as well as the internal and external obstacles facing local cooperatives in establishing themselves administratively and structurally.



Brazil's National Congress (middle) in Brasília.

### Findings:

Porto Alegre's integrated solid waste management program is not very successful from the standpoint of social inclusion. Workers' incomes vary from cooperative to cooperative and are generally lower than Brazil's minimum wage. They are offered little in the way of job security and benefits. Cooperatives are not economically self-sufficient and leaders lack the necessary technical capacity for effective management.

The situation in Brasilia is similar in many ways, particularly in terms of the internal challenges to promote cooperation and cohesion. Infrastructure remains weak. Despite federal money earmarked for development, more than half of the cooperatives in Brasilia do not have a legal site to conduct their activities. There is some degree of optimism amongst trash pickers, however, as new laws favoring their work are enacted, and interaction with



Trash pickers separating municipal solid waste (Cavahada triage unit in Porto Alegre.)

powerbrokers and political leaders give them a sense of involvement in the decision making process.

### Discussion:

The question remains as to whether waste management as practiced in Brasilia and Porto Alegre contributes to the social inclusion of trash pickers. It is also questionable whether the stigma associated with working with waste can be reduced or eliminated. In terms of income, there is indication that in some cases street scavenging can be more profitable than working in a cooperative. Finally, it is uncertain at this stage whether the goal of full-fledged, self-sufficient cooperatives can be achieved, particularly as trash pickers struggle to organize and extricate themselves from patterns of dependency and local institutions still hold on to historically established political and economic behavior.