

Recover Them from Oblivion. Recover the Community's Ability to Produce

Cristina Lescano and El Ceibo

BY GABRIEL BERGER AND LEOPOLDO BLUGERMAN

LOW-INCOME SECTORS (LIS) OFTEN face tough obstacles and tensions that make it hard to act collectively. But a small group of people, made up of 40 families in a poor Buenos Aires neighborhood, overcame those barriers and organized to change the conscience of residents in Palermo, a trendy Buenos Aires neighborhood. We are talking about a collective of garbage recyclers known as El Ceibo.

THE BEGINNINGS: ORGANIZED TO SURVIVE

In our neighborhood, Palermo, 1989, we used to get together while we tried to buy some groceries for our families, with seven women, all of us with our children; we all were outside the law, because each one of us was living illegally in houses that didn't belong to us: we were okupas [slang for illegal squatters of abandoned houses], young and most of us single mothers, and we hardly had a buck to live... There was hyperinflation those days, the president Alfonsín resigned... We, or me, who cares, needed to make something...

Coming to Buenos Aires from southern Patagonia in the mid-80s, Cristina Lescano got a job at City Hall as a community worker, but lost it a few years later, due to political reasons. Jobless, and in the midst of hyperinflation, that's how the story of cooperative founder and Palermo inhabitant Cristina Lescano begins. But from that beginning follows the story of a woman who decided to organize people like herself, and fight to improve their situation. Cristina taught women reproductive health and mobilized them to get free contraceptive pills. At the same time, she also started an organization to defend the houses they were occupying illegally, but which had been vacant since the end of the 70s, when the military government evicted its former residents because of a planned highway that was never constructed.

Abandonment is a common thread throughout Cristina's narration: the abandoned highway project, the abandoned houses, and the abandoned poor people taking those houses to find some shelter. But always some people try to do something to halt the cycle of neglect. That's how the story of Cristina and the origin of El Ceibo began.

Throughout the late 80s and early 90s, El Ceibo created a network of grassroots groups to defend the illegal occupants of the



Some El Ceibo staffers, with Cristina (far right), transport recycling material. They all wear uniforms, as they display the bags for inorganic garbage that show the alliance between Greenpeace Argentina and El Ceibo in "Programa Basura 0" (Zero Waste Program).

otherwise vacant houses, even working with the Buenos Aires city administration to form the network. In the process, the scope of its activities grew, providing social support to single mothers and poor families by giving them a shared place to express their problems, helping them obtain ID cards that would allow them access to social and other services, and helping their children get scholarships.

THE LATE 90S: STRATEGIES TO GENERATE INCOME

As we couldn't find a job for years, cartonear was the only chance to get some bucks.

In the late 90s, the activities of this loosely institutionalized group continued to evolve as the economic situation in the country became increasingly unstable with increasing rates of unemployment and poverty. Many LIS families and groups began to see garbage collection as a survival strategy to earn some cash. *Cartoneros* dug through the trash to rescue almost anything that could be recycled and sold to middlemen. This activity was prohibited by law, so the *cartoneros* or *cirujas* were forced to work by night, in small groups or individually, usually paying bribes to local authorities.

The garbage might be said to be improving in the neighborhood. Once a solidly middle class neighborhood with sprawling houses

on the outskirts of the city, a large section of Palermo became the trendy *Palermo Soho* in the late 90s, reminding visitors of the New York Soho, the *Barrio Gotico* of Barcelona or Boulevard Saint Germain des Prés in Paris. Cristina remembers silence and the singing of the birds as part of the landscape of her childhood Palermo, an area loved by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges.

As the Argentine economy became *nowhere-stagnated-land*, with high rates of unemployment and poverty, some people living in Palermo began to notice those changes taking place in their backyards, and became receptive to initiatives like that of El Ceibo. Recycling has now become “cool” and something one should show off to one’s neighbor.

THE VALUE CHAIN: JUST A FEW NUMBERS OF A BIG BUSINESS

The garbage always pays well... There’s a lot of money and interest in the garbage.

But first, let’s examine the business of recycling itself. *Cartoneros* (also known as *cirujas*) gather and classify recyclable items such as paper, glass, metals or clothes from residential and office trash, and then sell it to the *depositero*, or store man; recycled and processed material is eventually sold as raw materials to companies.

In Buenos Aires, 4500 tons of garbage are produced every day. The six waste collecting corporations that operate in the city take around 85% of it. Most recyclable trash is gathered up by those informal workers, the 10.000 to 25.000 *cartoneros* of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, who receive an average of US \$60 per ton collected. The next step in the value chain (*depositero*) adds a 15% margin. In a highly concentrated market, processors earn about US \$400 per ton. According to some estimates, the *cirujas* as a whole take in US \$30 million yearly, and the entire business produces US \$150 million (*La Nación*, 6-25-2006), only taking into consideration the paper-related market in Buenos Aires.

Needless to say, *cartoneros* don’t pay taxes and the rest of the actors move in a legal twilight zone, with the acquiescence of some authorities.

THE ORIGINAL IDEA

That’s when I thought ‘Why don’t we work together to get a better price for what we sell, while we take care of the environment?’

If the *cartoneros* could involve neighbors in the cooperative project, teaching them to separate organic from non-organic waste, Cristina explains, “then collecting it from their homes once or twice a week, we wouldn’t break the law, and later, we could put all the garbage together and take that to our *galpón* [storehouse] so we can clean the waste and have more economy of scale—one thing is the result of one family working; another is the production of 40 people—and sell it at a better price... we also can negotiate better.” That was the starting point for Cristina.

Nevertheless, the idea faced resistance: “As we didn’t know how to organize the work collectively, and didn’t have the money, we had to get in contact with a crowd of people to help us... It was hard because of the law, and because we were *cirujas*. Then, what to do? We needed to go out and beat the prejudice, both of the rich and the poor people.”

... AND HOW THE LAW LED TO INNOVATION

I realized that the garbage belongs to the one that produces it.

Informal recycling activity in Buenos Aires was illegal because the garbage on the streets belonged to city-contracted waste-collecting companies. *Cirujas* were pressed both by the law and by those public utilities firms that saw them as competitors. But Cristina thought they could use the legal framework as an opportunity to win potential clients’ loyalty: “We knocked on their doors, and as they saw us in Palermo every day for years, working in the light; thus they could trust in us.”

THE PROJECT

Now that we have the big picture in mind, we’ll see how El Ceibo works: Ten El Ceibo promoters canvass the pilot zone, a hundred block area with some 56.000 residents. They explain the benefits of recycling, the mission of El Ceibo (recycling both people and garbage), how the neighborhood could help the LIS to earn its money productively, and how to separate inorganic from organic waste. Cooperation grew from a hundred clients in 2001 to around 900 clients at present. El Ceibo’s number of providers increased after it began to collaborate with Greenpeace Argentina in a program called Basura 0, intended to promote new legislation in Buenos Aires regarding solid waste management policies. That alliance, which led to the passage of a law in 2005, was a hallmark of El Ceibo’s popularity.

Now, if the neighbor agrees, one of the 15 *recuperadores* stops by the house on a regular basis with his/her *carrito*, and takes the waste to El Ceibo gathering point in a storefront. Those *recuperadores* visit almost fifty clients every working day. As the *recuperadores* collect the solid waste from the homes and not from the streets, they aren’t breaking the law.

Inorganic waste is brought to a central point and then trucked to the *galpón*, where eight *acopiadores* separate, clean, and start the recycling process. After that, the waste is sold to specialized recyclers. The logistic-administrative duties are assigned to six persons, mostly members of the Administrative Council, the cooperative’s governing body. El Ceibo takes in US \$32,000 - 36,000 yearly for the recycled materials. Each of the 40 members earns from US\$ 1,400 to US\$ 2,900 per year, an amount which includes a city government subsidy.

WORKING TOGETHER

We the cirujas aren’t used to work together, we don’t know how to work in a group, we needed to do that if we wanted to survive... It was hard for us to act collectively .

Despite the large numbers of *cirujas*, they weren’t used to working together or presenting a united front in the agenda-setting process with other waste-stakeholders. It is hard, Cristina says, and we believe it: the city government office in charge of solid waste management that monitors the *cartoneros* says that there are just five cooperatives in Buenos Aires, employing 110 persons (around 1% of the *cartoneros*), even though there are thousands of individual *cartoneros* working in the city.

El Ceibo, one of the few cooperatives that has managed to organize, emerged as a collective actor in the first part of the value chain



El Ceibo's President, Cristina Lescano, in el galpón, after waste was cleaned and recycled.

of the garbage collection-disposal process. They could only accomplish this over time, Cristina says when asked about the project's resilience, "because we know each other from a long time, now our children are working as promoters or *recuperadores*, and the neighbors know us for a long time." In this process, *cirujas* took on a new economic role: *recuperadores urbanos*, urban recyclers.

ALLIANCES: LEARNING TO WORK TOGETHER, WORKING TO LEARN TOGETHER

I always thought: if we want to make it, we need to open up ourselves... it was strange for us to work with Americans, Europeans, foundations, politicians, but I think it was stranger to them, to

see the way we, the poor, work. It was fine because we learned from each other. It is so useful, for us certainly... I think it was useful for them too... but the rich don't trust in the poor.

The cooperative managed to act with continuity and collectivity, not only because of the strong ties binding its members; its social capital; but, as Cristina concludes, "because we are open to everyone who has something that can be useful to us: whether it is money, experience, networking or political clout."

Examples of alliances include work with Asociación Conciencia that provided training to El Ceibo on how to build an institutional and unified discourse for negotiating with local authorities; Greenpeace Argentina on how to work with the media and get visibility for the group; CLIBA (a waste collecting company); the World Bank, and more recently, AVINA, with its support for the production of crafts and artwork using recyclable materials. El Ceibo showed openness to alliances, but with two conditions: "as long as you don't use me politically and we understand how to take advantage of your help, you're welcome," Cristina asserts.

Gabriel Berger is a professor at Universidad de San Andrés in Buenos Aires (UdeSA) and director of the Graduate Program in Nonprofit Organizations. He leads the SEKN team at UdeSA. Leopoldo Blugerman is a research assistant on the SEKN team at UdeSA. He holds an M.A. in International Relations from Bologna University, Italy.

FIRST RECOVER THE PEOPLE, THEN RECOVER THE GARBAGE

"How did we start with this project? In the end of the 1990s, laws passed by the dictatorship that governed the country said the garbage on the streets belonged to the firm that collected it. This led us to develop the following strategy: to pick up the garbage in the door of our clients voluntarily, instead of the usual method of the cartoneros: picking up the waste from the garbage bags that neighbors leave on the streets... We are closer to our clients because of our strategy, and despite the laws having changed,

our type of relationship with them remains the same... From the very beginning we were driven by the same principle: Recover the people, and then recover the garbage."

"Society changed after the 2001-2002 economic and political crisis. It is more open to support this kind of initiative. [Also] we opened our minds to working with people outside the cartoneros. In this sense, if the one who has the money wants to give us anything to make corporate social

responsibility [sic], it is welcome because we need the resources... the sole thing that we don't want when it comes to making an alliance, is to be used politically, or to be eaten by our partners... In the end, a cooperative has to work and plan its strategy as corporations do, regardless of its legal status."

— Cristina Lescano, President of El Ceibo

"Many of the people working here started the bond because we treated the problem of the okupas [ille-

gal occupants of the houses], but soon we all realized that if we didn't work, we couldn't make it. It was so hard to change the minds of the poor people working here, with almost no concept of the duty, with no previous formal work, or not having any formal activities for a long time... We follow Cristina in everything she decides. Some times we discuss about this or that, but in the end, what can I tell you? Cristina la tiene muy clara con esto [has it right],"

— Alfredo Ojeda, El Ceibo promoter, and Valeria Corbalán, in charge of administrative affairs.