

Capacity Strengthening of Waste Pickers' Organisations

Results and Lessons Learned from the CARE
Project

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Title:

Capacity Strengthening of Waste Pickers' Organisations: Results and Lessons Learned from the CARE Project

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Contents

1.	INTRODUCTION.....	4
1.1.	Highlights.....	4
2.	OBJECTIVES.....	5
2.1.	General Objective.....	5
2.2.	Specific Objectives.....	5
3.	CONTEXT AND RATIONALE.....	6
4.	GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES.....	6
4.1.	Occupational Health and Safety (OHS).....	7
4.2.	Human Rights.....	8
4.3.	Provision of the Public Waste Service and Formalisation.....	8
4.4.	Soft Skills and Experiential Sessions.....	9
5.	IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SESSIONS.....	9
5.1.	Occupational Health and Safety (OHS).....	9
5.2.	Human Rights.....	10
5.3.	Provision of the Public Waste Service and Formalisation.....	11
5.4.	Soft Skills and Experiential Sessions.....	11
6.	RESULTS.....	14
6.1.	Scope of Activities.....	15
6.2.	Immediate Results by Component.....	15
6.2.1.	Occupational Health and Safety (OHS).....	15
6.2.2.	Human Rights.....	15
6.2.3.	Provision of the Public Waste Service and Formalisation.....	15
6.2.4.	Soft Skills and Wellbeing.....	16
6.3.	General Considerations.....	16
7.	LESSONS LEARNED.....	16
8.	RECOMMENDATIONS.....	17
9.	CONCLUSIONS.....	18

1. INTRODUCTION

The work carried out by waste pickers constitutes an essential component of the waste recovery system and of the consolidation of the circular economy. However, this activity continues to take place within a context characterised by structural gaps in income, formalisation, working conditions, social recognition and effective access to rights. In this context, training and capacity-strengthening actions do not constitute a structural solution to these challenges. Nevertheless, when designed in a relevant and contextualised manner, they can contribute in concrete ways to reducing certain risks, improving specific practices and strengthening organisational processes.

Within the framework of the CARE project – Collective Action for Recycling and Empowerment – a strategy of training and capacity-building activities was implemented targeting organisations of waste pickers in the cities of Barranquilla, Puerto Colombia, Bogotá and Cajicá. These actions sought to address needs identified jointly with participating organisations, combining technical, regulatory, social and wellbeing components with the aim of strengthening key capacities for the provision of recovery services within the public waste management system.

The sessions included training processes in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), Human Rights, provision of the public waste service and formalisation, as well as activities aimed at strengthening soft skills and individual and collective wellbeing. These sessions were implemented at a key moment, coinciding with the enactment of Decree 1381 of 2024, which reinforces the inclusion of waste picker organisations within the public waste service framework. These activities do not seek to replace public policies nor to comprehensively resolve the structural conditions faced by waste pickers. Rather, their scope focuses on facilitating access to key information, strengthening organisational practices, reducing immediate occupational risks and contributing to the recognition of waste pickers as actors within the public recovery service. This report presents the scope, implementation and results of these activities, as well as the lessons learned and limitations identified. Its purpose is to serve as a reference for other organisations, projects and initiatives seeking to design and implement capacity-strengthening processes with waste picker organisations, highlighting both the concrete contributions of such interventions and the challenges that remain in advancing towards more dignified, safe and sustainable working conditions in the recycling sector.

1.1. Highlights

- 16 waste picker organisations engaged across four territories (Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cajicá and Puerto Colombia), through structured in-person training processes.
- 799 total participations recorded across Occupational Health and Safety, Human Rights, regulatory formalisation and soft skills components (participations counted per activity).
- Targeted regulatory support provided to 11 organisations, focusing on traceability requirements and compliance under Decrees 596 of 2016 and 1381 of 2024.
- Participatory and contextualised methodology applied, adapting content to territorial realities and operational constraints of each organisation.

- Immediate results concentrated at the level of information access and organisational reflection, without claiming structural impact in income, working conditions or formalisation levels.
- Key lessons identified for future interventions, particularly the need for sustained technical accompaniment, clearer monitoring frameworks and alignment with public institutions.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1. General Objective

To strengthen specific social, technical and regulatory capacities of waste picker organisations participating in the CARE project in the cities of Barranquilla, Puerto Colombia, Bogotá and Cajicá through the implementation of training sessions and organisational strengthening activities. The purpose is to contribute to the reduction of occupational risks, improved understanding of rights and obligations, and enhancement of practices related to the provision of the public waste recovery service, recognising the limits of such interventions in addressing the sector's structural gaps.

2.2. Specific Objectives

- To strengthen the basic knowledge and practices of waste pickers in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), focusing on the identification of frequent occupational risks, adoption of self-care measures and prevention of incidents and accidents associated with recovery activities.
- To promote recognition of waste pickers as rights holders through Human Rights training processes that facilitate identification of rights violations, knowledge of complaint and reporting mechanisms, and access to relevant protection information, without assuming that knowledge alone guarantees effective rights enforcement.
- To strengthen organisational leaders' understanding of the regulatory framework governing the public waste recovery service, with emphasis on material traceability and the provisions established in Decrees 596 of 2016 and 1381 of 2024, as input for improving regulatory compliance and organisational management.
- To contribute to strengthening key soft skills such as teamwork, assertive communication and cooperation, as well as individual and collective wellbeing, recognising these as enabling factors for organisational functioning, participation and internal cohesion, without implying improvements in structural income or labour conditions.

3. CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Recycling activities in Colombia are largely carried out by waste pickers operating under conditions marked by informality, precarious labour arrangements, exposure to health and safety risks and limited social recognition, despite their fundamental contribution to waste recovery and the circular economy. These conditions reflect long-standing structural gaps that exceed the scope of isolated interventions and require sustained public policy, investment and institutional transformation.

In this context, training and capacity-strengthening processes do not in themselves resolve structural challenges. However, when designed in a contextualised manner and aligned with organisational and regulatory processes, they can contribute concretely to reducing immediate risks, improving specific practices, strengthening internal organisational management and facilitating access to information relevant to the exercise of rights and obligations.

The CARE project was conceived as a targeted intervention within the aluminium value chain, with emphasis on material traceability and strengthening coordination among recovery actors. Waste picker organisations in Barranquilla, Puerto Colombia, Bogotá and Cajicá were engaged due to their key role in material recovery and classification processes, as well as the regulatory and operational challenges they face in complying with public waste service requirements.

The training sessions implemented under the project were therefore justified as complementary support mechanisms, aimed at strengthening technical, regulatory and social capacities relevant to daily organisational operations. These actions do not replace state responsibilities nor resolve broader living conditions, but seek to improve specific practices related to occupational risk prevention, knowledge of human rights, understanding of the regulatory framework and organisational functioning.

From this perspective, the strengthening of soft skills and wellbeing components is understood as enabling collective work, participation and organisational cohesion, rather than compensatory measures for structural gaps. Their inclusion responds to the need to address social and organisational factors that directly influence the sustainability of recovery processes and organisational capacity within the recycling value chain.

4. GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

The activities implemented under the CARE project were structured as a set of complementary training interventions, designed on the basis of needs jointly identified with participating waste picker organisations. The intervention logic recognised that the sector faces structural gaps; however, it also identified specific areas – such as access to information, organisational management, risk prevention and understanding of the regulatory framework – where training processes can make a concrete contribution.

The strategy was organised into four components:

- (i) Occupational Health and Safety (OHS),
- (ii) Human Rights,

- (iii) Provision of the public waste service and formalisation, and
- (iv) Soft skills and wellbeing.

Each component responded to differentiated objectives and targeted specific profiles within the organisations, combining sessions open to waste pickers with activities focused on organisational leaders.

The methodological design prioritised a participatory and contextualised approach, adapting content to the territorial and operational realities of organisations in Barranquilla, Puerto Colombia, Bogotá and Cajicá. The activities were not conceived as structural solutions to the sector's challenges, but rather as targeted support measures aimed at strengthening specific capacities and improving informed decision-making within the organisations.

4.1. Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)

The Occupational Health and Safety component aimed to strengthen basic capacities for identifying and managing risks associated with recovery activities. The intervention focused on promoting prevention practices and self-care measures in response to frequent risks encountered in the collection, sorting and handling of recyclable materials.

This component recognised that waste pickers operate in contexts where limitations in infrastructure, equipment and working conditions persist – aspects that exceed the scope of a training intervention. Accordingly, the objective concentrated on improving access to practical and contextualised information that may contribute to reducing immediate exposures, without assuming that training alone eliminates the inherent risks of the activity.



Illustration 1. Training on occupational risks – Cajicá

4.2. Human Rights

The Human Rights component sought to facilitate access to relevant information regarding the rights of waste pickers in the exercise of their work, as well as the institutional mechanisms available for addressing potential violations.

The approach avoided an *assistentialist* framing, recognising that rights violations are rooted in structural and institutional factors that cannot be resolved solely through training processes. The intervention aimed to contribute to recognising waste pickers as rights holders and as actors within the public recovery service, strengthening their capacity to identify problematic situations and make informed decisions.



Illustration 2. Human Rights workshop – Bogotá

4.3. Provision of the Public Waste Service and Formalisation

This component was primarily directed at leaders of waste picker organisations, given their responsibilities in administrative and regulatory management. Its objective was to strengthen understanding of the regulatory framework governing the public waste recovery service, with emphasis on material traceability and the provisions established in Decrees 596 of 2016 and 1381 of 2024.

The component also addressed key operational challenges associated with regulatory compliance, including administrative capacity constraints, technical resources, access to information systems and infrastructure limitations. The aim was to promote a realistic understanding of compliance requirements and support informed organisational decision-making, recognising that formalisation and regulatory compliance are gradual processes shaped by broader institutional and economic conditions.



Illustration 3. Training on provision of the public waste service and formalisation – Barranquilla

4.4. Soft Skills and Experiential Sessions

The soft skills and wellbeing component was implemented with a targeted group of organisations, selected on the basis of operational criteria and progress in organisational and traceability processes. Its inclusion responded to the identification of internal factors – such as communication, cooperation and role management – that influence collective functioning and the sustainability of organisational processes.

The activities combined structured training sessions aimed at strengthening internal organisational dynamics with moments of group integration in environments different from the usual workplace. This component was conceived as support for organisational functioning and internal cohesion, without implying structural improvements in labour or economic conditions.

5. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SESSIONS

This section outlines the operational implementation of the training and strengthening sessions carried out under the CARE project, including their territorial distribution, participating organisations and overall participation figures. The information presented refers to the execution of activities and does not, in itself, constitute an impact assessment.

The sessions were delivered in person and generally lasted approximately half a day per organisation. Logistics and facilitation approaches were adapted to the territorial and operational conditions of each participating group.

5.1. Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)

Occupational Health and Safety training sessions were conducted during April and May 2025, with participation from waste pickers belonging to 16 organisations located in Bogotá, Barranquilla, Cajicá and Puerto Colombia. A total of 311 participations were recorded, distributed as follows:

City	No Organisations	No Participants
Bogotá	7	147
Barranquilla	7	127
Cajicá	1	18
Puerto Colombia	1	19
Total	16	311



Illustration 4. Occupational risk training session – Puerto Colombia

The content was adapted to the operational realities of each territory, focusing on risks associated with collection, sorting and handling of recyclable materials. Information was also provided on basic procedures for reporting incidents and accessing emergency services within each locality.

5.2. Human Rights

Human Rights workshops were delivered during June and July 2025, with participation from waste pickers representing the 16 organisations engaged in the project. A total of 320 participations were recorded:

City	No Organisations	No Participants
Bogotá	7	150
Barranquilla	7	129
Cajicá	1	22
Puerto Colombia	1	19
Total	16	320



Illustration 5. Human Rights training session – Barranquilla

Sessions were conducted in person using participatory methodologies aimed at facilitating understanding of core Human Rights concepts and their relevance within the context of recycling activities.

5.3. Provision of the Public Waste Service and Formalisation

The component addressing provision of the public waste service and formalisation was delivered in October 2025 through sessions directed at organisational leaders.

One session was held in Bogotá with representatives from five organisations, and a second session was conducted in Barranquilla with representatives from six organisations. In total, leaders from 11 organisations participated.

The sessions were delivered in person and structured as technical clarification and discussion spaces addressing regulatory compliance requirements and material traceability. Particular relevance was given to the implementation of Decree 1381 of 2024, which places increased emphasis on mass balance reporting, traceability and progressive regularisation.

Discussions covered basic traceability elements, documentation and record-keeping challenges, and operational constraints related to administrative capacity and infrastructure.

5.4. Soft Skills and Experiential Sessions

The soft skills and wellbeing sessions were conducted during November and early December 2025 in Barranquilla and Bogotá. Five waste picker organisations participated, selected according to operational criteria and progress in organisational and aluminium can traceability processes.

The sessions combined structured training activities with group integration components. A total of 168 participations were recorded.

Barranquilla Sessions: Activities took place between 18 and 21 November 2025, with 117 waste pickers participating from three organisations:

No	Organisation	City	No Participants
1	ASORESCATAR	BARRANQUILLA	30
2	FENACICLAR	BARRANQUILLA	45
3	METRORECICLAR	BARRANQUILLA	42
TOTAL			117



Illustration 6. Experiential session – Fenaciclár Waste Picker Association

Sessions included participatory workshops focused on teamwork, assertive communication, leadership, shared responsibility and cooperation. These were delivered during structured morning sessions, followed by group integration activities.

Bogotá Sessions: Sessions were conducted on 27 November and 2 December 2025, with participation from 51 waste pickers representing two organisations:

No	Organisation	City	No Participants
1	ASOREPCOL	BOGOTÁ	31
2	ASOFRAIN	BOGOTÁ	20
TOTAL			51

Training activities followed a similar structure to those in Barranquilla, adapted to each organisation’s dynamics. One activity, entitled “Strategies at the Table”, was designed as a structured group exercise to promote coordination, role distribution and collaborative work.



Illustration 7. Recreational activity at the beaches of Puerto Colombia. From left to right: waste pickers from Asorescatar and Metroreciclar

In both cities, sessions were held in recreational facilities that allowed the combination of formal training with group integration in environments different from the usual workplace. These spaces were included to support collective dynamics and interaction, without implying structural improvements in working or economic conditions.



Illustration 8. Experiential session – Reciclando Por Colombia Waste Picker Organisation (ASOREPCOL)



Illustration 9. “Chef Experience – Strategies at the Table” workshop. Waste pickers participating in group activities. From left to right: members of Asofrain and Asorepcol



Illustration 10. Recreational session – ASOREPCOL waste pickers

6. RESULTS

The results presented below primarily refer to the scope and immediate effects observed during the implementation of the sessions. As the project did not include a baseline assessment or longitudinal follow-up after the training activities, it is not possible to attribute structural changes in working conditions, income levels or degrees of formalisation exclusively to these interventions. Accordingly, the results are concentrated at the level of access to information, generation of structured dialogue spaces and strengthening of specific capacities.

6.1. Scope of Activities

In total, the following participation figures were recorded:

- 311 participations in Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) sessions.
- 320 participations in Human Rights workshops.
- Representatives from 11 organisations participated in sessions on provision of the public waste service and formalisation.
- 168 participations in soft skills and wellbeing sessions.

These figures refer to participations per activity. A single individual may have attended more than one training component. Overall, the activities engaged 16 waste picker organisations across four territories.

6.2. Immediate Results by Component

6.2.1. Occupational Health and Safety (OHS)

The sessions provided spaces for identifying risks associated with collection and sorting activities, as well as discussing self-care practices and basic procedures for reporting incidents and accidents. Active participation was observed in contextualising content to the operational realities of each organisation.

The scope of this component is limited to the strengthening of information and practical reflection during the sessions. No post-training measurement was conducted to assess changes in accident frequency or systematic use of personal protective equipment.

6.2.2. Human Rights

The workshops made visible information gaps related to labour rights and institutional reporting mechanisms. Participants identified situations they perceived as rights violations in the course of their work and became aware of relevant institutional channels available in their territories.

The results are concentrated on improved access to information and clarification of available reporting routes. No evidence is available regarding subsequent activation of complaint mechanisms or modification of structural rights-related conditions.

6.2.3. Provision of the Public Waste Service and Formalisation

The technical sessions provided updated information on the current regulatory framework and requirements associated with material traceability. Participating leaders discussed operational challenges related to record-keeping, mass balance reporting and regulatory compliance.

The scope of this component is confined to technical clarification and discussion of practical constraints. No formal evaluation was conducted to assess improvements in compliance levels following the sessions.

6.2.4. Soft Skills and Wellbeing

The sessions facilitated group interaction and reflection on internal organisational dynamics, including teamwork, role definition and shared responsibility. Participants expressed positive appreciation for both the training and integration components.

No monitoring instruments were implemented to measure sustained changes in organisational indicators such as member retention, productivity or internal conflict reduction.

6.3. General Considerations

Overall, the results of the process are concentrated in strengthening informational capacities and generating structured dialogue spaces with participating organisations. The activities implemented constitute targeted support interventions within broader organisational and regulatory processes, aimed at reinforcing clarity of roles, consistency of records and internal participation.

However, the effective development of these processes depends on institutional, economic and territorial factors that exceed the scope of the project.

7. LESSONS LEARNED

The implementation of the strengthening sessions generated relevant methodological and operational insights that may inform future interventions with waste picker organisations.

1. Training is necessary but not sufficient: Training processes facilitate access to information and encourage practical reflection; however, they do not, in themselves, alter structural conditions such as income levels, infrastructure constraints or degrees of formalisation. Their effectiveness depends on alignment with sustained technical support and public policy frameworks.

2. Regulatory compliance faces structural barriers: Organisational leaders' willingness is not necessarily the primary constraint. The practical implementation of regulatory obligations depends on administrative capacity, access to technical tools and financial resources that are not always available.

3. Operational availability shapes participation: Waste picker organisations operate under daily income dynamics that generate real opportunity costs when attending training sessions. This requires flexibility in scheduling, duration and logistical arrangements.

4. Access to information on rights does not guarantee enforcement: While workshops clarify reporting mechanisms and institutional routes, effective activation depends on institutional responsiveness and on participants' trust in protection systems.

5. Soft skills development requires continuity: Sessions addressing communication and teamwork generate meaningful reflection; however, sustained changes in organisational dynamics require ongoing accompaniment rather than isolated activities.

6. Results measurement should be strengthened in future interventions: The absence of a baseline and follow-up mechanisms limits the ability to assess concrete changes. Incorporating simple monitoring tools would improve the evidence base regarding attributable outcomes.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the implementation experience, the following recommendations are proposed for organisations and initiatives seeking to develop capacity-strengthening processes with waste picker organisations:

1. Clearly define the intended scope and level of change: From the outset, it is essential to distinguish between training activities, immediate results and structural impacts. This allows for realistic expectation management and transparent communication of outcomes.

2. Complement training with progressive technical accompaniment: Regulatory and traceability components require practical support and follow-up over time. Integrating technical advisory services and operational accompaniment increases the likelihood that information will translate into concrete organisational improvements.

3. Incorporate basic monitoring and follow-up mechanisms: Establishing a simple baseline and post-training follow-up tools would enable assessment of changes in knowledge, practices or administrative processes, thereby strengthening the available evidence on outcomes.

4. Design interventions compatible with operational realities: Scheduling and duration of sessions should take into account the opportunity costs faced by organisations. Adjusting timing and logistical arrangements facilitates more sustainable participation.

5. Align interventions with institutional actors and public policy frameworks: Training processes in Human Rights and regulatory compliance are more likely to generate practical effects when accompanied by effective channels of dialogue with local authorities and relevant public waste management institutions.

9. CONCLUSIONS

The sessions implemented under the CARE project enabled the delivery of a structured training process involving 16 waste picker organisations across four territories, addressing technical, regulatory and organisational dimensions relevant to recovery activities. The intervention was organised into differentiated components tailored to participant profiles, combining sessions open to waste pickers with activities specifically directed at organisational leaders.

In terms of scope, the activities facilitated access to information on occupational risk prevention, human rights, the regulatory framework governing the public waste service and internal organisational dynamics. They also created structured dialogue spaces that allowed these topics to be contextualised within the operational realities of each territory.

The experience confirms that capacity-strengthening processes targeting waste picker organisations should be understood as complementary interventions within broader inclusion strategies that reinforce administrative capacities, record-keeping systems and institutional coordination. Their principal contribution lies in strengthening specific capacities – such as knowledge of institutional reporting routes, basic incident reporting procedures and traceability requirements – and in supporting more informed organisational decision-making, particularly when linked to sustained technical accompaniment, monitoring and institutional coordination.

This report seeks to provide a transparent account of the intervention's actual scope, immediate results and lessons derived, with the aim of informing future designs that are more rigorous, measurable and strategically aligned in their engagement with the waste picker sector. When articulated with the current regulatory framework and sustained technical support processes, such interventions can provide practical foundations for more consistent inclusion of the waste picker sector within the aluminium value chain.