

# Resettlement and the Human Dimension: Lessons from an informal recycler inclusion project

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## Abstract

Despite the emphasis in development writing on systems, mechanisms, procedures and processes, the actual success or failure of development projects in practice often depends on individuals and their relationships. Personal relationships, developed over time around shared values, affinities and goals, can transcend institutional lines and stakeholder categories to catalyze actions and produce concrete results. This paper focuses on a group of economically displaced informal recyclers (“waste pickers”), in Georgetown Guyana, to suggest that such intangibles as respect, trust, commitment and enthusiasm can be critical to success, exceed expectations, and even turn a project into a transformative experience.

## Introduction

One of the best-kept secrets in development is that individuals matter. Despite the structuralist assumptions implicit in most development writings, practical experience shows that individuals and their relationships have the power to transcend institutional lines and stakeholder categories, catalyze actions, and yield concrete results. Intangibles such as respect, trust, commitment and enthusiasm – and relationships developed over time around shared values, affinities and goals – can lead to outcomes that exceed expectations and even make a project transformative.

The study of development as a *field of social action* is generally associated with the Wageningen school.<sup>i</sup> This “actor-oriented approach” finds an intriguing predecessor and complement in the work of Victor W. Turner, who questioned “the almost total identification of the social with the social structural” of the British Social Anthropology school and sought to balance it with Znaniecki’s “humanistic coefficient,” which held that “sociocultural systems depend not only for their meaning but also for their existence upon the participation of *conscious* human agents and upon men’s relations with one another.”<sup>ii</sup> Immediate human connections, engaging “total human beings in full psychological concreteness, not abstract, generalized sociocultural entities” (1987:80), constituted for Turner “a social bond uniting these people over and above any formal social bonds which are due to the existence of regulated social relations in organized groups.”<sup>iii</sup> Turner’s concept of “anti-structure” and later, “Comunitas,”<sup>iv</sup> posited a “relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals;” a “direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities” (1969:131-2). This dimension was for him not only “a reputable object of scientific study,” but a core element of social process (1974:45).

This article will expore the case of a group of informal recyclers affected by the closure of an open dump in Georgetown, Guyana, to argue that this human dimension can be critical to achieving successful development outcomes.

## The Intervention

When the Le Repentir dumpsite in central Georgetown, Guyana, closed in January 2010 under the IDB-financed Georgetown Solid Waste Management Program (GSWMP), 86

persons engaged in the informal collection of materials (“waste picking”) at the old site faced the loss of their livelihoods.

These people worked in dangerous and unsanitary conditions and suffered social stigma and exclusion, yet earned more at the dump than they likely would from other activities. They worked individually, often in fierce competition with one another. Thefts were rampant, fights common, and the police occasionally called in to restore order.

A Formalization Plan was developed under the Project to allow all eligible recyclers to maintain their incomes in improved conditions by granting them access to the new landfill and improvements such as photo ID badges, protective gear, a dedicated headquarters with lockers, toilets and showers, a materials storage facility, medical checkups, vaccinations and regular visits, and health and safety training.

Although collective organization was critical to both their economic betterment and long-term sustainability at the site, the recyclers expressed a strong disinterest in any such arrangement. Competition and mistrust among them were high, and initial attempts to create a representative committee proved unsuccessful.

### **Trust Building**

The Project launched a program of technical assistance, including sustained and regular contact that allowed the Social Specialist to develop a personal rapport with the recyclers. Spending time in their workspace, eating, working and talking with them, and consistently delivering on promises made facilitated the gradual development of mutual respect and trust.

To take an example, the issue of transport to the new site was put to the recyclers for discussion and vote and their proposed solution was to receive individual bicycles; a decision that was honored by the Government in a public ceremony involving the Minister and the Mayor.

The Social Specialist also identified and engaged other actors who could lend support. The original Project Coordinator, who had little interest in the recyclers, was replaced by one who was supportive of this work. The new Site Supervisor initially favored removal of the recyclers, but eventually became one of their strongest champions. When the Landfill Operations Manager, whom the recyclers had known from the former site, left his job, the recyclers petitioned for his return, and he was reinstated as “Recycling Manager,” specifically charged with supporting them. The recyclers greeted him with an impromptu party, with singing, dancing and hugs.

An ad-hoc multi-institutional team gradually emerged from this process that, while not a formal entity, proved more effective than many formally-constituted teams. Various actors were progressively engaged and offered their time, effort, commitment and even money on ways that exceeded their job descriptions. “Staff” and “beneficiaries” mutually influenced one another in a positive feedback loop, each side increasing its own commitment in response to the demonstrated commitment of others. The “beneficiary-staff” divide itself was further transcended in multiple ways.

### **Building Ownership**

Initial victories, such as the bicycles and the return of the Landfill Operations Manager, demonstrated the recycler’s ability to influence the Project and helped create a sense of ownership. Several actions that failed initially were repeated once interest among the recyclers themselves saw the need for them. A new Recyclers Management Committee was elected, for example, and began to hold weekly meetings and monthly assemblies. A collective bank account was opened and monthly member dues instituted. The name “GT Recyclers” was legally registered as an official organization. The recyclers began to

increasingly appreciate these meetings and became capable of deliberating for hours when necessary. Several distinguished themselves as leaders and began to assume greater responsibility. A new set of site rules were agreed on and jointly enforced by the Committee and Site Authorities. The Committee also began to take initiatives of its own, such as using the Project's grievance mechanism to communicate its dissatisfaction with the state of landfill operations.

### **Horizontal Knowledge Sharing**

In light of these developments, IDB and the Regional Initiative for Inclusive Recycling (RIIR) organized a horizontal knowledge exchange to bring the recyclers in contact with successful organized recyclers elsewhere. A screening of the documentary "Waste Land" was held for them at the landfill, with a meal prepared by the site staff. The recyclers, who had never before seen images of recyclers elsewhere, responded enthusiastically.

The screening was followed by a surprise visit from the film's star, Brazilian recycler leader Sebastião ("Tião") dos Santos. The recyclers greeted Mr. dos Santos with applause when he entered the room. He led them in a two-day workshop focused on the benefits of collective organization, engaged in waste picking with them, visited one of their homes, and participated in a triumphant going away party at which he pledged to return to see their progress. The workshop ended with a collective pledge to organize, with the initial goal of presenting a float in the upcoming Mashramani carnival.

### **Building Partnerships**

Mr. Santos' visit also included a screening of Wasteland for key institutions. The participants were visibly moved and the Representative of WHO/PAHO and one Consultant visited the landfill the next day. At an informal dinner that night, the idea emerged of a jointly financed consultancy to support the recyclers' preparation for Mash and the broader training it demanded. The Consultant began working with the recyclers on a volunteer basis before her contract was finalized. The Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (MLGRD) offered to include the recyclers in its solid waste management-themed float. The two major local waste-hauling firms pledged financial support. The application was submitted to the National Mash Committee and approved.

GT Recyclers signed a formal agreement with a local paper mill for the purchase of cardboard. An MOU was prepared with the Government granting the organization exclusive rights to materials recovered at the landfill. Two new scrap metal buyers were identified who purchased at higher prices. The Ministry of Health and Salvation Army also pledged support, and a Matching Fund was developed under the Project to leverage new support.

GT Recyclers requested that the Ministry of Labor's Cooperatives Department include them in their program. The initial reaction was cool until several representatives visited the site and encountered a meeting of uniformed recyclers in a clean and organized meeting space. A meeting was held at the Ministry the next day with two recyclers and several supporting staff. The recyclers made their case and their request was approved. Trainings were held, a Cooperative Charter drafted, and the group's formal application for cooperative status submitted.

### **Mash**

The recyclers formed a Mash Committee and launched a Mash Camp. The float was built of 80% recovered materials and featured a 12-foot "Moongazer Recycler," based on a Guyanese folklore figure, who encouraged people to properly dispose of their waste. A "Massacura Man" mask was also built to dance while putting bottles in its mouth. The revelers' uniforms were made of painted CDs, plastic bottles, and bottle caps. A large banner

reading “GT Recyclers: Recycling is Everybody’s Business” was designed to be carried by two revelers while others collected bottles and cans from the street with plastic bags.

The preparations were not without challenges and, the night before the event, the float was still not ready. Yet an ad hoc team, composed of recyclers, site staff, and others, came together spontaneously to complete the task. The Site Supervisor and Social Consultant lent constant support to a core group of recyclers. The Site Manager procured the sound system and served, together with the Recycling Manager, as “Marshals.” The Operator’s chief carpenter and one assistant helped build the float and accompanied it throughout the day. Several site staff were at the landfill at 5 AM the day of Mash to help prepare. Others participated as revelers. The Project Coordinator drove the truck at the back of the float. The IDB Social Specialist participated as a reveler. The PAHO/WHO Country Representative wore the Massacura Man mask. Children were placed atop the sound truck and rode the length of the parade. When the Mash Queen (who had also designed the float and costumes) became ill from over-exhaustion, another recycler took her place. Bystanders spoke, danced and posed for photos with the recyclers. The singer of the float’s theme song spontaneously appeared and danced with them.

The next day, the nation’s leading newspaper featured a full-page cover photo of the float with the headline “Timely.” The Competition results, announced the day after, had GT Recyclers as Second Prize in the Small Float Category – above the Ministry that had hosted them.

## Conclusion

Actor-oriented analysis is ultimately a structural approach that sees individuals in their socially defined roles (as “actors”). While it is useful in understanding conflict in projects, it is less well adapted to explaining success. The story of GT Recyclers and their victory at Mash cannot be fully understood without taking account the dimension of individuals, relationships, fun, play, enthusiasm and faith. It suggests that such intangibles can be mobilized in the service of development outcomes and enhance more traditional structurally oriented approaches. Although by definition qualitative, mobilization of the human dimension can produce measureable results. Although by nature flexible, adaptive, and contextual, it nevertheless follows certain generative principles that may themselves be identified and applied in diverse contexts.

The three-step process of: (1) showing the recyclers a film about recyclers who organized to achieve a goal; (2) bringing the film’s star to participate in their own organizational process; and (3) encouraging them to undertake a common dream of their own had the effect of operating a shift in perspective; a reframing of their roles and possibilities. This process also helped reframe their image in the eyes of other actors, including the Government and general public; effectively rebranding them in the eyes of society. Mr. Santos’ visit – first as image and then as a person – provided a critical bridge from the imagined to the concrete. The RIIR and IDB are now supporting his return to participate in the Launch Ceremony of their new Cooperative in July.

In closing we might note that this peripheral social component, initially intended to mitigate resettlement impacts, ultimately became the most successful part of the Project, and actually enhanced the Project’s public visibility and institutional support, making this a true case of the tail wagging the dog.

<sup>i</sup> For examples of this tradition, see: Apthorpe (1984); Wood (1985); Arce (1993); Arce and Long (1987; 2000); de Vries (1992); Long and Long (1992); Hobart (1993); Peel and Watts (1993).

<sup>ii</sup> Znaniecki (1936), cited in Turner (1974:17;45;269).

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid, idem.*

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<sup>iv</sup> The “free or unbound as well as a bonded or bound dimension” of the social “in which men confront one another not as role players but as ‘human totals,’ integral beings who recognizantly share the same humanity” (Turner 1974:269).

## **Bibliography**

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