



# Designing an Urban Recycling Cooperative

*This resource has been created by Anke Schwittay and can be used and adapted as a creativecommons resource, with acknowledgements.*

## AIM OF ACTIVITY

Students are tasked with designing a recycling cooperative as a local alternative economy initiative to provide more stable and higher sources of income for informal workers and tackle inequalities in class, gender and ethnicity.

I used this activity in my third year undergraduate class on Urban Futures, which is taken mainly by International Development students, including joint honors. The activity complements learning about urban economies, livelihoods and resources. It could also be used in other courses addressing urban challenges, such as geography, anthropology and economics, or business school students.

This exercise is based on an activity developed by my colleague Demet Dinler. With her permission I have adopted her series of 6 workshops to a two-hour workshop for my class. Before the workshop I had set up clusters of tables with big sheets of paper, marker pens, sticky notes and photos from various recycling cooperatives. I kept encouraging students to use these thinking materials throughout the activity and to draw and work with images in addition to writing.

## ACTIVITY OUTLINE

### 1. Explain Workshop Objective

I explained to students that their task was to design a plan for setting up a recycling cooperative, where waste pickers will no longer sell their waste individually to middlemen, but will bring, sort and sell it to the cooperative instead, which will on-sell it directly to wholesale recycling plants. This cuts out the middlemen who take a large cut of the sales and allows the cooperative to negotiate for better prices based on higher volume of waste.

I also posited a series of challenges that their designs had to address. Below are some examples, for a full list see the student handout.

- The cooperative will be a direct challenge to the vested interests of the middlemen who have traditionally bought the waste from individual collectors, and also to large wholesalers who work with recycling plants. Especially the middlemen, most of whom also live in the neighbourhood, want to stop the establishment of the cooperative. How will you overcome their resistance?
- Most women in the neighbourhood are responsible for domestic work and are not allowed to get paid work, following deeply entrenched patriarchal rules, although many women would like to earn money. As one of the objectives of the cooperative is to work for gender equality, this situation needs to be addressed. How will you do that and get women involved in the cooperative? On the other hand, in many families children are also picking waste to supplement family income. How will you address that?
- You do not have the resources to start the cooperative and will need to identify and approach local leaders, municipal and other public authorities, NGOs and donors, local banks or other places for support. How will you do that?

## ACTIVITY OUTLINE

### **2. Coop location and name selection**

The whole class then decided on the cooperative's location and name. I always encourage students to pick a location with which they, or at least some members of the group, are familiar, and have also provided background reading for students to do before the workshop.

I then divided the class into 4 groups of 5 to 6 students, allowing them to self-select to work in the areas they were most interested in.

## ACTIVITY OUTLINE

### 3. Group Design Work

The four groups consisted of governance, external support, economic matters and social issues. The student handout provided each group with a list of questions to answer, in order to facilitate and guide their work. Below are some example questions for each group (for a complete list download the student handout from the website).

#### 1 Governance

Write a list of general principles and rules to govern the cooperative. Make sure you make its core values explicit and explain how they will inform the day-to-day operations of the cooperative as well as its more general functioning.

- How will you ensure a truly cooperative and equitable work environment, eg charter of behaviour, sanctions, training, ways to deal with divisive gossip, conflict resolution mechanisms etc?
- How will you ensure that the coop is representative of all members? By whom will it actually be run? Do you have paid staff, volunteers, elected representatives?
- Will you charge a membership fee and if yes, how much will it be?

## ACTIVITY OUTLINE

### **2. External Support**

Develop a plan to recruit potential supporters you could approach to get the coop off the ground. Write a pitch/presentation for them.

- This pitch will need to be tailored to the different organizations you are approaching, eg an NGO interested in issues of justice, a bank you might ask for a low-interest loan, a local politician who might be interested in votes, a local business wanting to show that it is socially responsible and engaged in the community or an environmental charity interested in sustainability.
- The residents of the middle and upper-class neighborhoods where coop members pick waste regard them as a public nuisance and often harass them. How will you change their opinion of and attitude towards waste pickers?
- How will you ensure that your external supporters will not impose their own vision of how things should be on the coop?

## ACTIVITY OUTLINE

### 3. Economic Matters

Work out the economic principles of the cooperative.

- How will members get paid?
- How will you set the prices for different types of recyclables?
- How will you ensure that all members get equal access to the same opportunities in terms of quality and quantity of waste?
- How will you ensure that individual members will not sell their recyclables directly to the recycling plant or go back to middlemen when they have immediate cash needs?

### 4. Social Issues

Develop a plan for talking to local families about women's involvement in the cooperative and the issue of child labor.

- What is the best format for these talks, eg house to house visits, community meeting, women-only focus group, street theatre, social media?
- What is your message around why women should become involved? How will you address patriarchal power and arguments?
- How will you address the involvement of older children in waste picking?

## ACTIVITY OUTLINE

### **4. Collective Masterplan**

Towards the end of the workshop students came together as a large group to combine all their findings into a master plan that addressed the most important issues they had identified. They collectively created a poster to visually represent their work.

### **5. Debrief**

Each creative activity needs to be followed by a collective discussion session in order to draw out students' learning and connect it to the larger topics of the class. I often do that in the following class, after sending students a short survey with some reflection questions.

## READING SUGGESTIONS

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### **These are the readings my students do for the classes connected to this activity:**

- Dias, S. M. (2016). Waste pickers and cities. *Environment and Urbanization*, 28(2), 375-390.
- Millar, K. M. (2014). The precarious present: Wageless labor and disrupted life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Cultural Anthropology*, 29(1), 32-53.

### **I also suggest various case studies of recycling cooperatives which students can read before the activity for inspiration:**

- Chikarmane, P., & Narayan, L. (2005). *Organising the Unorganised: A Case Study of the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (Trade Union of Waste-pickers)*. Pune: KKPKP.
- Tirado-Soto, M. M., & Zamberlan, F. L. (2013). Networks of recyclable material waste-picker's cooperatives: An alternative for the solid waste management in the city of Rio de Janeiro. *Waste management*, 33(4), 1004-1012.

### **Here are two further readings by Demet Dinler who originally created this activity:**

- Dinler, D. Ş. (2016). New forms of wage labour and struggle in the informal sector: the case of waste pickers in Turkey. *Third World Quarterly*, 37(10), 1834-1854.
- Dinler, D. Ş. (2019). *Market, Morality and (Just) Price: The Case of the Recycling Economy in Turkey*. In *The Politics and Ethics of the Just Price*. Emerald Publishing Limited.