

Eighteen Years Gathering Paper in Belo Horizonte

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In most of the large Brazilian cities, hundreds of thousands of women and men struggle in the streets, day and night, to prevent garbage from increasing the pollution of streams and rivers. They are often people who survive in an isolated, disperse and deeply unhealthy job. Besides getting sick easily, they are victims of the exploitation by intermediates from the industries that recycle materials. The gatherers are often unemployed and have a low professional and cultural level. They also suffer with the lack of understanding and the unwillingness of the city halls.

In Belo Horizonte, that picture changed when the Street Pastoral of the Archdiocese encouraged and oriented the garbage gatherers to stand up for their rights. That work began in the 1980's and its goal was to boost the organization of those men and women, encouraging them to fight for the appreciation of their job. Above all, the intention was to promote the rescue of those people's citizenship, previously condemned to live in the streets and not to have any rights.

For that reason, on May 1st, 1990, the Association of Paper, Cardboard and Reusable Material Gatherers of Belo Horizonte, Asmare, was founded. It resulted from an intensive mobilization, through public acts, the occupation of spaces to select the recyclable materials and protests submitted to the City Council of the capital of Minas Gerais. By taking on a claiming role next to the city hall, the Association marked the beginning of the organized movement of fight for the rights of the homeless. That fight has been causing transformations in the social model and has been forcing the public administration to break a historical stance in relation to the gatherers as unable to defend themselves. Therefore, they migrated from a delinquency situation to the acknowledgement by the municipal public power that they are partners in the selective garbage collection.

In 1992, the city hall started to build a shed for Asmare. That was an important victory of the movement, which started the long march to rescue the dignity of those people as citizens and as workers. The organization of the gatherers in the municipal level consolidated itself and spread throughout Minas Gerais and, very shortly, throughout the country. Today there's the consolidation of the National Movement Recyclable Material Gatherers (MNCR), which

guarantees a category of workers acknowledged by the Brazilian Occupation Rank (CBO).

At national level, MNCR became the interlocutor in the production of a public policy related to solid wastes and environmental sanitation, as foreseen in the Sanitation Act. Thus, the gatherers earned the right to be included in the service rendering of the selective collection, at the municipal level, regardless of bidding processes.

The gatherers claim and understand that Belo Horizonte may project itself in Brazil exactly due to an effective policy of inclusion of the gatherers in that process, bearing in mind the journey undertook alongside the municipal public power and the civil society for so many years.

Asmare relies on several partners, among which Foundation France-Liberté, the president of which is the former French first lady Danielle Mitterrand. It has been providing crucial support to the productive inclusion of the recyclable material gatherers, which made garbage not the superfluous, one more luxury to be discarded, but revealing new uses and new purposes in the discarded objects. For that reason, Asmare has been receiving funding from that Foundation. Recently, Mrs. Danielle Mitterrand established the NGO Foundation France-Liberté-Brazil and invited Maria das Graças Marçal, Asmare's leading gatherer, to be its vice-president in Brazil.

Present day

Today, Asmare works with 286 associates and former homeless people. Among the associates, seventy come from Programs for Homeless People of the City Hall and of the Street Pastoral of Belo Horizonte. Some people are also sent by Justice to observe punishments.

Table 1 presents the distribution of the associates by activity and their respective working place.

Located in downtown Belo Horizonte, Asmare is in charge of the collection, selection, pressing and trading of 421 tons, which are added every month to an average 52 tons that come from the monthly collection made by the Superintendence of Urban Cleaning (SLU), making up a total of 473 tons of recyclable materials.

Data referring to Asmare's monthly production of recyclables are presented every month to the Department of Special Programs of the Superintendence of Urban Cleaning of Belo Horizonte (DP/PRE – SLU), in the form of a "Summary of Monthly Production of Selected Materials", for conference and assessment.

It's important to point out the relationship established between Asmare's gatherers and associates and the civil society during the entire development process of the figure of the gatherer as an environmental agent, thus acknowledged by themselves and by many of the townsmen. The relationship of acknowledgement of the service rendered by the gatherers is reflected by the number of collaborators of the Association. It has a network of collaborators, all of whom are almost spontaneous, delivering material to the vehicles of automated gathering.

Table 1 – Distribution of the associates by activity and their respective working place.

Activities	Ituiutaba Shed	Contorno Shed	Reciclo I	Reciclo II	Ecoblock
Collectors	29	20	-	-	-
Selectors	40	31	-	-	-
Diarists, art workshops	8	2	-	-	-
Workshops, woodwork/blocks	-	6	-	-	7
Workshop, kitchen/waiters	-	-	14	25	-
Sewing workshops	-	14	-	-	-
Gatherers	-	82	-	-	-
Pressers	4	4	-	-	-
Guards	-	-	-	-	-
Totals	81	159	14	25	7
General Total	286				

Obs: The table also includes workers sent by the following organs: Center for Follow-Up Support to Punishments and Alternative Measures (Ceapa); Sector of Control of Substitutive Punishments (Sefips); and Program of Service Rendering to the Community. Those numbers may change, considering that the Association often receives people sent by those organs.

During 2007, the association carried out the selective collection in several private institutions, bank agencies, households and condominiums, providing the weekly/fortnightly service in close to nine hundred collection places, with the automated collection, rendering service to an average of one hundred bank agencies, 450 condominiums and households and 350 generators, divided among public sector organs and private institutions, varying from offices to large industries.

Another factor that demonstrates the quality of the service rendered by the Association is the quality of the material collected. During 2007, both the quantitative productive data and the data concerning the qualitative factor of the selective collection were accounted for. During that year it was verified that the index of wastes (non-recyclable material) mixed to the recyclable ones did not reach the 5% margin in Asmare's automated collection. In turn, the automated collection carried out by the Superintendence of Urban Cleaning of Belo Horizonte delivered to the Association material with an average of 40% of wastes.

Besides the gatherers of recyclable materials, Asmare relies on ten technicians to support the management tasks, social assistance, training and preparation, and on nine hired children of gatherers and former homeless people, working on the selective collection in private companies that are partners of Asmare. The average income of the gatherers is currently around US\$ 337.73*, which permits that in those years of work 97% of the gatherers have already been able to conquer the self-owned house, keeping all the children and adolescents in school. The children



Photos: an offer of Asmare.

Maria Bráz, 62 years old, gatherer of recyclable materials.



Tânia Pereira, 48 years old, selector of recyclable materials.

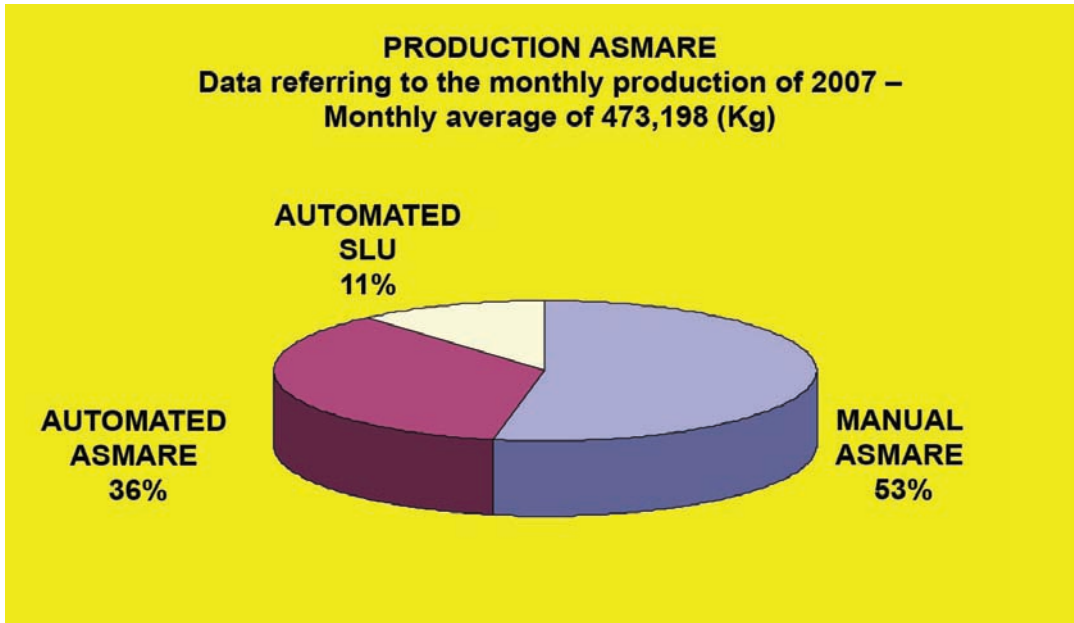


Figure 1 – Origin of the recyclable materials processed in Asmare.

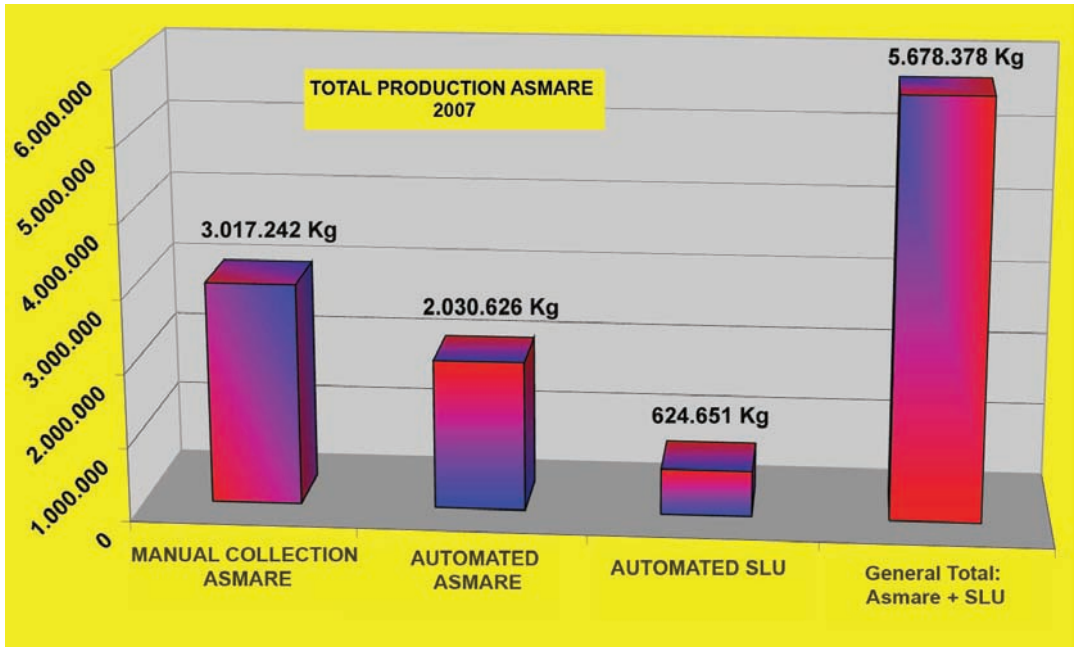


Figure 2 – Production of Asmare in 2007

between zero and six years old are sent to the day care center, which is a partnership with Belo Horizonte’s city hall.

Asmare’s work provides the increase of the life cycle of the sanitation embankment, the saving of natural resources and the urban cleanliness, besides ensuring the feeling of families who survive from that activity.

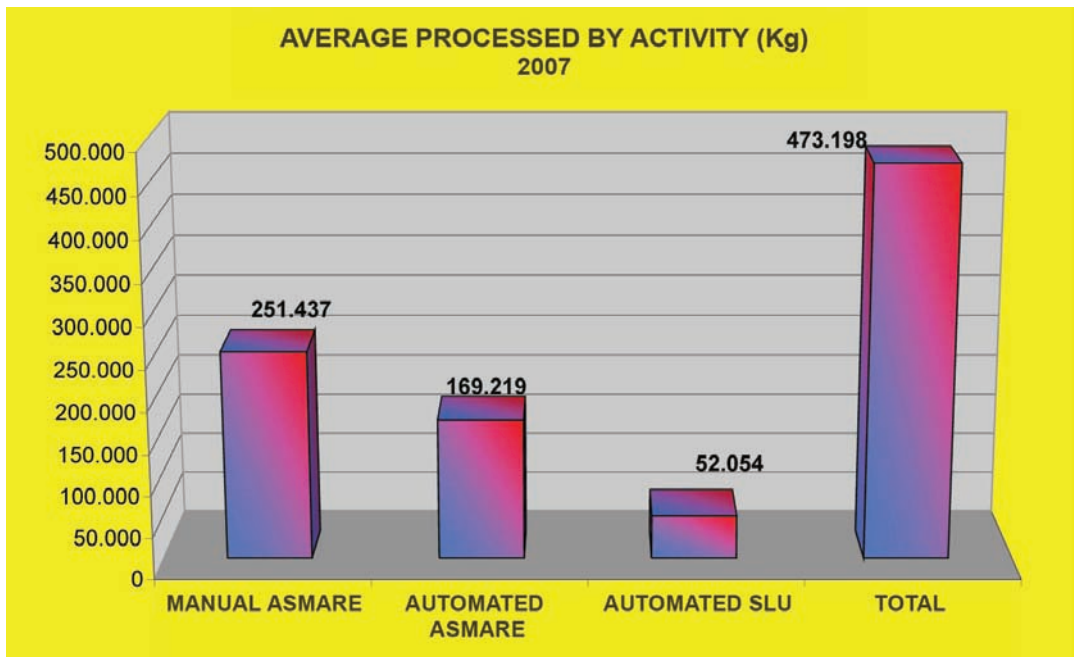


Figure 3 – Monthly average production – 2007

Activities of the Association

Asmare's work, which was limited, at first, to collecting, separating, pressing and trading the recyclable materials, was expanded due to the need to serve more homeless people. There was also an attempt to diversify the activities, bearing in mind the different skills and interests of the workers. Today, Asmare develops three fronts of action:

1. *Collection, separation, pressing and trading of the materials*

Asmare has two sheds to separate and process the materials. One of them, the association's head office, is located at 10555, Contorno Avenue, which is the working place of gatherers who carry out the collection with carts in the streets and use the shed to separate and to press the materials. It's a self-owned space divided into selection boxes and operation. It has restrooms, kitchen and business offices.

Amare's other shed is rented by the city hall and is located at 460, Ituiutaba Street, in the neighborhood of Prado. The shed receives the selective collection that was carried out, by means of trucks, in many neighborhoods of the city. The gatherers separate, press and trade the materials. Besides the operational area, the shed also has restrooms, kitchen and a business office.

2. *Handicraft and reutilization workshops*

Most of the workshops for the reutilization of recyclable materials take place at Reciclo Espaço Cultural – I, located at 10564, Contorno Avenue. It has instructors and monitors who guide the creation of objects made up of fabric, plastic, metals and other materials.

Asmare also has a theater group, monitored by artists for social mobilization both in schools and businesses and which also integrates gatherers from other associations, besides Asmare.

The woodwork workshop is developed in the selection shed located at 10555, Contorno Avenue. It is in charge of making the carts the gatherers use to collect materials and of the containers to store the recyclable materials and other objects.

3. *Reciclo Espaço Cultural*

The objects produced in the workshops are traded at Reciclo Espaço Cultural. It's a privileged relationship space of the gatherers and former homeless people with the society. The former homeless work in the space in such activities as waiters, kitchen helpers, hosts, managers, among others. Reciclo I, located at 10555, Contorno Avenue, integrates fourteen people; Reciclo II, located at 2164, Bahia Street, assembles 25 people, all of whom used to be homeless. The qualification of those people takes place in partnership with Estácio de Sá University, among others.

Besides hosting the reutilization workshops and the products' store, Reciclo makes samba shows and lectures. The space is ornamented with reusable materials. Seeking for alternative forms of expression, Reciclo's goal is to promote the debate about the importance of recycling and of the inclusion of the gatherers. Asmare's assemblies, the qualification courses of the members, as well as the confraternities also take place within the settings of the Reciclo Espaço Cultural Asmare.

4. *Eco-block*

Eco-block is a workshop where blocks, used to pave streets and made from wastes of the civil construction, are produced. The activities take place at the Estação de Tratamento de Resíduos Sólidos of Belo Horizonte, located on BR 040. Seven Asmare associates work there.

From Asmare's work on, many gatherers and former homeless people, who used to be chemical addicts, or even some people with mental diseases, had the opportunity to re-establish themselves and to develop new values. They had the opportunity to study and to provide better living standards for their children. Today, Asmare's business team and that of Reciclo Espaço Cultural are made up, to a large extent, by gatherers who are advised by technicians and partner universities.

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Received on 6.27.2008 and accepted on 7.2.2008.

Translated by Rodrigo Sardenberg. The original in Portuguese is available at http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_issuetoc&pid=0103-401420080002&lng=pt&nrm=iso.