

# BUZO OR RECYCLER: WASTE COLLECTING AS GIFT EXCHANGE IN THE CONTEXT OF A NEW WASTE REGIME

*Kathleen N. Skoczen and Maria A Caram Ibarra*

**Kathleen N. Skoczen**, (skoczenk1@southernct.edu) Ph.D., is a professor of anthropology at Southern Connecticut State University and served as a Social and Behavior Change Consultant for Clean Cities, Blue Ocean.



**Maria A Caram Ibarra** (macaram@usa.net) has a background in management and in environmental education. She is a Dominican/American independent consultant who often works with EcoServices, Punta Cana, Dominican Republic.



justifiably concerned that new systems may threaten their livelihoods. As such, they leverage their work, vis-à-vis a gift economy, to place themselves as essential to addressing the environmental crisis.

**Keywords:** Dominican Republic, informal labor, waste recycling, women's work, informal waste collectors

## A Breaking Point

From 1990 to 2020, the DR has seen an increase in its population from 7.13 million to 10.9 million and an increase in its wealth as a result of the outsized success of its tourism sector, with the GDP per capita rising from \$992 in 1990 to \$8,604 in 2021 (MacroTrends, 2021; World Bank, 2021). This growth resulted in an exponential expansion in consumption. As consumption increased, the DR has had to deal with a mounting garbage crisis. This is a more visibly acute crisis for small island nations that rely on tourism. Aside from the alarming environmental consequences, tourist economies find their economic stability in jeopardy, which depends on the image of an untainted paradise. Solid waste management (SWM) has been ill-equipped to keep up with the crisis: plastic waste is overwhelming families, communities, and the environment. Recycling has long been part of Dominican culture, but the expansion in consumption

and transformation in waste products has rendered former systems obsolete.

The local population in the northeast province of Samaná, DR, has been repurposing, reusing, and recycling waste for as long as people can remember. In the past, neighbors gave each other organic waste to feed pigs, and trucks would crawl through neighborhoods with crackling speakers blaring, asking for recyclables—metal, cardboard, bottles, etc. Sometimes, people were paid, but mostly taking away unwanted junk and helping someone make a couple of bucks was payment enough. Household recycling and repurposing was also ubiquitous. This changed with the expansion of commercial goods made from or wrapped in plastic: everything from hair clips to shoes to furniture is now made of plastic; rice, beans, oil, spices, soap, etc., once sold in paper or someone's reused bottle, are now wrapped in plastic.

Ecosystems are overwhelmed: many residents send their plastic waste to the dump, but too often, it would wash out into nearby ravines, creeks, and streams. Of the three municipal dumps in the Samaná Province, one in Sánchez sits partially in a national park amid a dike system; the other two dumps in Samaná and Las Terrenas both sit atop hills, adjacent to the cities and within view of open water. Much of the plastic trash never makes it to the dump, either because it was left where it was dropped or

## Abstract

The Dominican Republic (DR) experienced an economic boom related to tourism development over the last 30 years. Subsequently, consumption has increased, accompanied by an exponential growth in inorganic waste. Without adequate solid waste management, an environmental crisis has developed. Plastic waste litters roadsides, streets, streams, and beaches, threatening the very industry that enabled it. Informal waste collectors are on the front line of addressing, if not alleviating, the crisis but are regarded as marginal and inconsequential. A new waste regime is inevitable and imminent. Waste collectors are

because collection services never arrived. Tropical rains accelerate the movement of plastic into the open water, creating, as described by one local resident, a lasagna of plastic at the bottom of the bay.

Fishermen in Sánchez report they smell the plastic while they fish. Plastic clogs drains and floods roads that had never flooded before. *Buzos* (divers), that is, informal waste collectors (IWCs), were the only barrier between disposal and the environment, and their salvaging depended on access to dumps and markets for recyclables. Even so, they could not retrieve all the plastic at the dump, nor were they able to capture plastic leaking into the environment or left or thrown away on the streets and alleys. The dumps are overwhelmed, and burning is commonplace, even as local communities suffer from health complications. The system is at a breaking point.

### A New Waste Regime

The waste regime, the “social institutions and conventions that not only determine what wastes are considered valuable but also regulate their production and distribution” (Gille, 2012:29), responded to this crisis. In 2020, a long-awaited national law addressing SWM finally passed and promised to bring change. While these changes would improve the current system for residents, the IWCs were justifiably concerned about their economic security. Waste pickers found themselves at the center of this transition, even though they were regarded by different authorities as marginal, informal, and inconsequential. When IWCs were told they would become full-time workers at the newly transformed transfer stations, many were skeptical.

IWCs depend in large part on a gift economy—in following Derida’s definition of a “pure gift,” a gift that does not imply an

enduring social tie, all of the conditions are met: The gift does not enter the receiver in a relationship of exchange, the value of the gift is not reckoned by either the giver nor the receiver (at least not at the immediate moment the gift is retrieved, for it is largely dependent on a market neither party influences), and therefore it is not recognized as a gift per se (Venkatesan, 2011). We argue, however, that the materials retrieved by IWCs sit somewhere between a pure gift and a gift (with lingering relationships of exchange and where values are calculated). IWCs are dependent on other people’s dispossession, and they are very often dependent on the administration of the dump (and the political actors who control the administration) for access to these potentially valuable discarded items.

This does come at a price, one might argue, as the IWCs are dependent on these gifts, and this places the IWCs in a position of negative reciprocity where there is a debt. This is then translated into a status in the hierarchical context of a capitalist economic system (Venkatesan, 2011). Thus, if the debt is not paid, a stigma is incurred. This stigma is recognized acutely by the IWCs, who then advocate for an understanding that they, too—in the context of a tourist economy that is dependent on a clean, pristine environment—are gift-givers. The environmental crisis of uncontrolled plastic trash affects the economic welfare of not only the community but of individual actors (e.g., private companies capitalizing on the beauty of the region and politicians who are held accountable) who, in this sense, receive a gift through the labor of the IWCs. As the IWCs are transforming inorganic waste into monetary resources, the tourism enterprises and communities are receiving the “gift” of a less tainted vista for visitors, which they then

### Figure 1

*Informal Waste Collector Standing amid Waste at the Landfill; She Also Owns a Pig Farm Adjoining the Landfill.*

(Photo by Kathleen Skoczen)



transform into monetary value through the tourist economy. Thus, IWCs struggle for recognition and respect as they equalize their status in the gift exchange. Yet, this is dependent on the recognition and acknowledgment that it is indeed a gift beyond the monetary recompense.

### CCBO Study

Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (CCBO)—the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) global program to address ocean plastic pollution—is working with the Dominican government to address the trash crisis. CCBO sponsored a research study of garbage on the province/peninsula of Samaná: I (Skoczen) was hired through CCBO to advise and mentor the research team. The team examined household consumption, use, and disposal and the solid waste management value chain: the different steps of recyclable waste—plastic, glass, metal, and cardboard—that pass through from generation until ultimate disposal or reuse/repurposing. An explicit goal of the research was to understand where women are participating in the

value chain, where they are not, and what obstacles and support exist to employ them as full partners in this process—with the implicit goal of furthering women's equality in the SWM value chain.

During February and March of 2021, two researchers (including Caram) collected data for the value chain study. They interviewed IWCs and others to understand the issues and concerns. The team found IWCs working at two of the three dumps in the province of Samaná, in small numbers relative to other parts of the country and the developing world more generally (Dias, 2016). Both Las Terrenas and Samaná had IWCs; both cities are primarily tourist-based economies. The third city, Sánchez, with a fishing and agriculture-based economy, had a smaller dump further removed from the city center.

The research team interviewed 20 IWCs, including 13 women (four in Las Terrenas and nine in Samaná). The team interviewed seven men (three in Sánchez, three in Las Terrenas, and one in Samaná). The dumps are not heavily monitored. The team observed on more than one occasion that people entered the dumps on an informal basis, making the number of active IWCs difficult to ascertain. Of the IWCs interviewed, ages ranged from 24 to 66 years old. Two IWCs were young (24 and 25 years old); three were 60 or older. The average age of those interviewed was 46.4 years old. The median age was only slightly higher. The amount of time working at the dump ranged from four to 60 years, with the majority of IWCs having worked on the dump for at least 10 years. Only one waste collector had finished high school, and one 66-year-old man had no formal schooling. In Samaná, many of the IWCs are related to each other through either blood relations or marriage ties. In Las Terrenas, this was the case for only a couple of the women. Many of the IWCs

identified family as a way of entering this type of work. Two women reported they started this work when they were nine years old, and one man started at the age of 12. Dumps, by design, are isolated; women working alone are vulnerable to harassment, robbery, and physical assault. Waste picking can also pose significant risk to health, as well as the psycho-social stress from social stigma (Ahn et al., 2020; Burgess et al., 2022).

### Working at the Dump

IWCs, often called *buzos* (divers) or *recicladores* (recyclers) in the DR, have worked independently as freelance waste collectors (Dey, 2020) and therefore enjoy little security or protection from the vagaries of the local government or larger economic actors in the country (higher level recyclers). They are at the mercy of the economy, a reality that played out painfully during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dey, 2020). Some IWCs appeal directly to fellow citizens by roaming the streets asking for metal, bottles, or cardboard; these IWCs are almost exclusively men. Women work in the dumps, a less public milieu, that poses alternate threats to the women's safety. Men also work in the dumps where all IWCs collect, classify, and sell recovered materials. While informal and marginal, IWCs are also increasingly recognized as key to addressing the solid waste crisis occurring throughout the global South (Burgess et al., 2022; WIEGO, 2019). While women and men spoke of the satisfaction, pride, and calmness they experienced being able to earn a living through recycling, there were also times when they were frustrated. Women expressed more problems, concerns, and dissatisfaction relative to the men, although many of their complaints converged, particularly surrounding support or the lack of support from the community and the government.

Women IWCs stated that they were dissatisfied generally with the working conditions and were doing it out of necessity, if not desperation. "Foul" (*asqueroso*) and hazardous working conditions are not simply a nuisance; in the absence of safety standards and personal protective equipment (PPE), IWCs put their health at risk. There was either insufficient PPE or none at all, exacerbated by COVID-19. Women reported they had gotten infections due to cuts. The terrain in the dumps was neither stable nor predictable and posed significant hazards:

I don't like it; it is disgusting, and it smells horrid. I only do it because I need money. I don't have any education nor a 'cedula' (identification card) to look for another job. (Las Terrenas, woman)

It is disgusting work in the dump; there are worms that get inside the hands, nails and feet. (Las Terrenas, woman)

Many IWCs emphasized that security was an issue at the dumps, especially for women. In this unprotected public space, women are easy victims, vulnerable to criminal elements, and are more dependent on each other and male companions, even as male coworkers can pose a threat: women's security is compromised by underlying sexism being realized in their workspace. While women reported being relegated to less desirable areas, there were also serious accusations of sexual harassment and assault. These working conditions put some women, particularly undocumented women, at greater risk than those who had male relatives to offer some form of protection. Indeed, in Samaná, where most women had male relatives working at the dump, there were few of these complaints:

There isn't security; when I started, some guys with a mask threatened me with machetes to steal the material I had gathered. We went to the police but I don't know if it was the police or that the other *buzos* fought them, but they left. (Las Terrenas, woman)

He has never been nasty to me, in terms of offensive or obscene words, but he does bother the Haitian girls and says, from his own mouth, that he touches the private parts of the Haitians who go to the landfill. (Las Terrenas, woman)

IWCs stated the importance of having structural support from the government. In Sánchez, a street sweeper who also visited the dump discussed the need for the government to take waste picking more seriously: he experienced a lack of security around his equipment, and he wished the government showed more interest. Other complaints focused on new policies to bury waste, limiting access to dumps during the transition phase, and eliminating resources that former administrations had offered. A lack of communication regarding government activities at the dump led to frustration, confusion, and fear around their ability to continue to make a living:

[Neither] the government nor the mayor has ever visited or talked to us; they should have a representative report on the reality of our problems. (Sanchez, man)

The mayor doesn't support us. We also talked to [a] supervisor of the environment. The government took away the income we need to sustain our families. (Samaná, woman)

The dump administrator made my life crazy; he would throw away material I had separated. My brother talked to him and the administrator started easing up on me. All because I was claiming my rights to gather materials. I think he did that because we are women. (Samaná, woman)

### Terminology: *Buzo/a* or *Reciclador/a*?

The terms "*Buzo/Buza*" (diver) and "*Reciclador /Recicladora*" (recycler) are sometimes used interchangeably. Five women in Samaná preferred *recicladora* over *buzo/a*; whereas in Las Terrenas, women saw no difference and referred to themselves as *buzas*. IWCs made a distinction between these two terms, telling researchers *buzos* collected from landfills while *recicladores* retrieve recyclables from the streets, *colmados* (corner stores), hotels, and restaurants. Nonetheless, many of the female IWCs working on the Samaná dump said they preferred to be called *recicladoras*. There was a stigma attached to *buzo*, while *reciclador* is generally seen as more respectable and less stigmatized. Participants stated that *buzo* has a dirty ("*sucio*," implying it is dirty, low level, and nasty work) connotation while "being a *recicladora* is a more dignified job":

"Buza" means to me a way to make a living; "recycler" has a wider concept, not only a way to make a living, but also it is a help to the environment. (Samaná, woman)

I identify myself as a recycler; before we were called *buzos*, and some [people] would insult us but now, they too are working as *buzos*. But in my mind, I am a recycler. I recycle plastics,

### Figure 2

*Former Informal Waste Collector Trained to Have a Recyclable Aggregator Business Enjoying His New Role.*

(Photo by Kathleen Skoczen)



bottles, iron, aluminum and copper. (Samaná, man)

### Money

Both men and women stated that they worked to earn money to support their families, "you have to put food on the table." While women generally said they liked earning money. They also acknowledged that men would earn more than they did, stating men were stronger, could work longer, and endured the heat better. One woman suggested that although men earn more, it is irrelevant, as they benefit less (*le rinde menos*) because they spend money on alcohol. Among the men, only one acknowledged that women may earn less. Most men did not respond to this question or pleaded ignorance "I don't know how much women make," or in one case, an IWC said his wife looks for discarded clothes, and it is slower work. With these distinctions, there was a general recognition that men earn more money. Both men and women mentioned that they look for different things and can earn differently because of this: metal may generate more money than

plastic or cardboard. In general, however, women and men reported that they were happy to earn enough to support themselves and their families. "I can then buy what I need and fend for myself." Even so, women were earning significantly less than men.

Physical stamina and strength played a role; men stopped less frequently, worked faster, and could keep longer hours, according to the women. Some women were not able to start first thing in the morning due to preparing meals, cleaning their homes, or getting children off to school. Women were sometimes bullied by male IWCs into working in less desirable spots. Men often supplemented their income from other related jobs, such as driving trucks, taking extra loads to the dump, etc. Men reported earning \$18 to 35 per day, while women earned between \$5 to \$8.80 per day. With their domestic responsibilities, women could not take on formal work, nor were they able to capitalize on the heavier, more lucrative materials at the dumps.

### Liberty

Freelance waste collection, the ability to exercise flexibility and control over when, where, and how much one worked, was a consistent narrative in the data. Women explicitly stated that they worked for *libertad*, freedom. Not only did the extra money give them freedom, but *going to work* gave them freedom; they felt better and happy earning their own money and working because they wanted to. Women valued flexibility and free time and making their own schedules. Women also spoke of covering expenses for the family, which made them feel good and calm (*tranquillo*). It made life more comfortable and less stressful. With a surprising degree of consistency, women expressed that waste picking gave

them freedom, self-sufficiency, financial security, and independence that translated into being happier, even if the working conditions were not always ideal:

I feel happy, I have my freedom, no one bosses me around and I feel secure, less stressed at home. I leave the house, and I have freedom to make my own schedule and I have access to money. (Samaná, woman)

I feel happy; being a recycler changed my life. [With the money I made] I was able to build my house. I was able to make money and better my family. (Samaná, woman)

Men were less likely to mention the flexibility of the work schedule, and indeed women suggested the men capitalize on longer, more structured days. They could start early in the day and stay until late in the day. For both the men and women, this work held value beyond the cost of their labor. Here we argue they transformed their work into a gift exchange. On one hand, they receive the gifts of others' discarded items and the gift of access to the dump from the administration. This places them in a relationship of exchange, obscure as it may be between specific actors. However, from a community perspective, there is debt, as demonstrated by the stigma attached to this work, which can be framed as a lifestyle or identity rather than a job: you *are* a *buzo*, you *work* at recycling, and recycling is something everyone does. It is with framing their work as a gift to the community that one can repay this debt, balance the exchange, and thus remove the stigma ascribed to "*buzos*." Waste picking, or "diving," may have a stigma, but when the work is transformed into legitimate contributions that benefit specific actors, sectors,

and the community, the stigma must be eliminated. Positioning oneself as such places *recyclers* at the center of a new waste regime, as it is transforming into a formalized system run by a mix of public and private actors. Thus, IWCs leverage their labor as essential to the health of the community, the economy, and to specific actors within that space: "where people fish" or "contribute to the development of the town."

### The Environment

IWCs repeatedly acknowledged the environmental crisis unfolding on the peninsula and that their work was a way to earn money but also a way to care for their city, the ocean, and the environment. It is noteworthy that none of these comments were offered by the IWCs in Las Terrenas. Sánchez and Samaná are both long-established cities in the province; Las Terrenas is a city built in the last 30 years around tourism development. Thus, Samaná and Sánchez IWCs may be more rooted in "place," while IWCs in Las Terrenas may not have extended family or social networks: The structural relationship and imbalance of exchange may be more acute, and more personal, for the IWCs in Samaná, and there may be more necessity to resolve it:

I am worried about the bay, where people fish, as they aren't taking care of it. It is dirty, and not being loved. (Sánchez, man)

We stop contamination and we contribute to the development of the town and the environment in a positive manner. (Samaná, man)

I identify myself as a "recycler"; doing this work, I help stop contamination and I like contributing to the

improvement of my town.  
(Samaná, woman)

### Conclusion

As the waste regime in the DR transitions to a formalized system that is a mix of public and private, IWCs find themselves in a precarious structural position. As freelance waste pickers, they are marginal, invisible, and thus easily dismissed. It is key, therefore, for IWCs to position themselves as providing an essential service, which they actually do, whose value extends beyond their monetary compensation. This positioning can move them from a situation where they are in debt to those who provide them “pure gifts” and equalize the exchange by framing their work as gift-exchange. Here, they repay the debt by extending the gift of their labor to the community, the government, and private entities (whale watching companies, eco-tourism enterprises, etc.). As is promised with the new waste regime, IWCs will be integrated into the formal workforce, where they will receive uniforms and identity cards. These symbols force the community to recognize their repayment of debt and remove the stigma. It is seemingly a logical goal of the men working on the dumps to leverage their work into the formal sector.

It is important to acknowledge that women are coming from a different structural position. The women made it clear that as freelance waste collectors, they enjoy the flexibility, lack of strict work schedule, and the freedom to come and go. While some women were completely reliant on this income, others worked to supplement household expenses or buy “luxuries.” Women acknowledged that this was attractive to them precisely because it was not formal, rather, it was flexible, and work schedules were open and unrestricted. The new waste

regime may be at odds with why women turn to this work.

Nonetheless, both men and women have an investment in public recognition and respect for their work. Elevating their status in the social hierarchy can pay off. The stigma attached to “*buzá*” puts women in a precarious and often dangerous position; working as *recyclers* is respectable. Moreover, the stigma attached to “*buzo*” places both men and women in a marginal position that may be construed as irrelevant to the new waste regime. Embracing the role of environmentalists, who are crucial guardians of the environment, at a time when the environment is the primary economic commodity in the marketplace, they not only balance a societal debt but also elevate themselves as indispensable and central to any new waste regime.

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