

# HELPING ECO WARRIORS FIND THEIR OWN VOICES

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## Abstract

Worldwide, informal waste collectors (IWCs) experience discrimination, stigma,

and sometimes harassment (Bulla et al., 2021). They rely on their own social networks to ply their “trade” and converse well with people with whom they have personal or business relations. Beyond this small network, IWCs do not usually need to talk to other people. Philippine-based social enterprise Project Zacchaeus (PZC) aimed to transform 60 IWCs into “Eco Warriors” in a program equipping IWCs with a variety of skills. The goal was to empower these IWCs to lead their families and communities and serve as role models to adjacent *barangays*. The authors explore the contrast between the mostly timid informal waste pickers and the grantee’s vision for them as leaders and effective communicators for environmental awareness. We describe the challenges in the ambitious undertaking, Caceres’s training contributions, and the gradual transformation of shy informal waste pickers into more confident, empowered Eco Warriors.

**Key words:** Philippines, empowerment, informal waste collectors

## Background

**P**roject Zacchaeus (PZC), a Philippine-based social enterprise, is a grantee of the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Clean Cities, Blue Ocean (CCBO) program. CCBO supports PZC to implement “Project *Eco Kolek*.” Eco Kolek

focuses on empowering and building the capacity of a group of informal waste collectors (IWCs), or waste pickers, to participate in improving solid waste management (SWM) in a community in Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> As part of the program design, PZC promotes these waste collectors as “Eco Warriors” and tries to equip them with leadership and counseling skills, as well as providing an understanding of how 3Rs<sup>2</sup> and adequate waste management practices align to protect the environment. By providing these skills, PZC seeks to empower Eco Warriors to lead their families and communities and serve as role models to adjacent *barangays*. A *barangay* (village) is the lowest-level political governance unit in the Philippines. It has its own set of elected officials and receives funds from the national government to implement national programs and projects at the grassroots level, including in the health and waste management sectors. It also provides a forum, the Barangay Assembly, where community members can express their collective aspirations, sentiments, and ideas for barangay leaders to hear and act on. PZC consults and coordinates regularly with the officials in Barangay Banca-Bancao<sup>3</sup> in implementing Project Eco Kolek.

<sup>1</sup>Palawan is a smaller island off the coast of the large Filipino island Luzon.

<sup>2</sup>3Rs refer to reduce, reuse, and recycle as methods of managing waste such as plastics, metals, clothing, etc.

<sup>3</sup>Bancao-Bancao is the name of the barangay in which Eco Kolek works and the Eco Warriors live.

## An Introduction to John Gastanes

I, Raul Caceres, am the main writer of this article and use the first person. When including the contributions of my co-authors, I attribute their ideas to them by name.

Project Zacchaeus was founded by John Gastanes, who previously worked in the United States but returned to his hometown, Puerto Princesa City in Palawan Province, Philippines. He met several informal waste pickers, locally called *mangangalakal*, a Tagalog word literally meaning entrepreneurs who pick recyclables and sell them to junk shops (junk shops are low-level waste aggregating/trading businesses). Perhaps this term is a play on another Tagalog word *mangangalkal*, meaning “scavenger.” Both words capture what most informal waste collectors in the Philippines do, that is, rummage through trash bins for anything of value, in particular recyclable items to sell. Gastanes empathized with the economically precarious and socially stigmatized waste pickers and wanted to help alleviate their challenges by introducing various livelihood projects. However, he noticed that the people in these projects eventually returned to waste picking. Based on this experience, Gastanes refocused his approach to help improve their situation as waste pickers. Then in January 2021, through a grant from USAID’s CCBO Program, Gastanes—together with PZC—launched Project Eco Kolek. The rest, as they say, is history.

Gastanes’s notion of supporting the community of waste pickers, with whom he became friends, is not just in terms of better income, although it is one of the main objectives. PZC has been working to help empower 60 informal waste collectors (whom he calls “Eco Warriors,”) including 34

women and 26 men, to improve their lives and well-being and to become community leaders and partners in promoting 3Rs/SWM at the grassroots level. Eco Warriors’ ages range from 19 to 92 (the oldest is also the acknowledged group leader). Through community-based training, PZC seeks to enhance the Eco Warriors’ life skills and develop their sense of pride as individuals beyond being waste pickers because these Puerto Princesa IWCs are marginalized and discriminated against, as other waste pickers are worldwide. Since two IWCs in the community died of heat stroke a few years ago, Gastanes first wanted to partner with the IWCs to co-create safe uniforms and ensure access to personal protective equipment that would protect them from the heat and other hazardous working conditions. Collaborating with PZC, the Eco Warriors co-designed their uniforms together with tailors. The IWCs co-designed their uniforms for protection, attractiveness, and to project a professional image and a sense of equality with workers in the formal sector. The Eco Warriors were also concerned about trudging from house to house in the sun, so Gastanes included bicycles with sidecars for waste and a few motorcycles in the PZC grant application, which CCBO later funded.

In order to help Eco Warriors raise their status as IWCs and also help the community understand the importance of caring for their environment, especially by implementing the 3Rs, Gastanes promoted the Eco Warriors as environmental champions in the community. This facilitated businesses recognizing the Eco Warriors’ services to the community and enabled them to secure access to the recyclables generated by big business establishments in Puerto Princesa.

PZC also facilitated community-based learning sessions to

## Figure 1

*A Team of Eco Warriors Wearing Their Co-Designed Uniforms; They Are Packing Plastic Waste They Have Collected and Sorted from an Establishment Partnering with Project Kolek/PZC.*

(Photo by PZC)



empower IWCs: Romeo, a young IWC whom Gastanes had met five years earlier, became an Eco Warrior and attended one of the USAID-supported sessions. Romeo admitted that he was reluctant to go to school because he was ashamed that people he knew might see him looking in trash cans on the street for recyclables to sell. After participating in the PZC session, Romeo learned to take pride in his work and the important role he plays in preventing waste from getting into the environment and eventually into the nearby sea.

## Reflections on Training Eco Warriors

In my experience, many people I have met assume that the human ability to communicate with each other is natural and part of the essence of being human. This assumption generates expectations that all people, apart from very young children, have the basic ability to articulate and make themselves understood by others. In my experience, in contemporary [Filipino] society, someone who is unable to speak out and express him/herself clearly in

conversations and human transactions is somehow viewed as an inferior person. This tendency to judge a person is perhaps manifested in the job interview or when someone is pitching his/her services to potential clients. Anyone who stammers or is faltering or inarticulate in this situation risks not being selected for the job or losing the potential client.

Perhaps it was with this assumption that staff from PZC trained a group of Eco Warriors on how to introduce themselves to community members and offer to collect segregated household recyclable wastes for selling to “junk shops.” They didn’t want the Eco Warriors to be rejected just because they didn’t know how to present and introduce themselves. PZC taught the Eco Warriors “to build rapport and gain the trust and confidence” of their prospective clients. They taught about non-verbal communication—posture and eye contact. Lastly, they gave a script for the informal waste collectors to master and use as their standard pitch when going house-to-house to recruit clients. PZC assumed that the Eco Warriors were ready after some training and practice sessions. However, PZC staff observed that Eco Warriors were still not ready and confident to present their pitches to other people/their future clients. In actual practice, they were nervous, anxious about their delivery, and kept forgetting the prepared lines.

During one of our regular grantee sessions, PZC shared with me these observations and the challenges they encountered on how best to train the Eco Warriors in communication—to develop their confidence and courage in sharing their stories, as well as in promoting 3Rs/SWM.

When I heard about these challenges, I proposed to PZC a

training on interpersonal communication<sup>4</sup> using a curriculum customized to the Eco Warriors’ specific needs.

Most IWCs anywhere in the world are subject to discrimination, stigma, and sometimes even harassment (Bulla et al., 2021). They rely on their own social networks to ply their “trade” and can converse well with people with whom they have personal or business relations. Beyond this small network, they do not usually need to talk to other people. This social-economic situation restricts not only limited social capital but also the skills needed to move beyond their own small social network.

Ramil (a pseudonym) said:

I don’t know how to talk to others [people outside his social network] because in my work, I don’t really have to. I grew up scavenging for recyclables in garbage bins at night—there is no need to talk and there is no one to talk to except my fellow scavengers.

And so, it is understandable that the IWCs were nervous and kept forgetting the script when they were asked to knock on household doors and business establishments, introduce themselves to strangers, and offer their waste collection services. In addition, the IWCs are very poor and might sometimes be expected to talk to people wealthier than they are.

<sup>4</sup>Interpersonal communication (IPC) is the process of sharing information, ideas, values, beliefs and attitudes between individuals, particularly in a face-to-face conversation. This allows for better understanding since aside from listening to the subject matter, the persons in conversation can interpret body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. IPC consists of a series of interlinked activities that include expressing, listening, reflection, and interpretation, etc.

## Conducting Training with Eco Warriors—Day 1

Cognizant of this situation, I developed the interpersonal communication (IPC) training to follow incremental steps, gradually drawing each participant away from his/her comfort zone until they were confident enough to introduce themselves to strangers. The training participants knew each other and were members of the same IWC community.

For the first exercise (introductions), I asked participants to form pairs. I gave each person two minutes to share a story from their lives that their partner didn’t know about. Participants then took turns introducing their partner and sharing the partner’s story with the rest of the group, doing their best not to add or subtract anything. This required the participants to listen carefully to their partners.

The purpose of the exercise was to make it easier for participants to share information in front of others because they were not talking about themselves but about their partner in the exercise. The exercise went well but also turned out to be an emotional period for everyone, as several participants chose to share their sufferings in life or that behind their joyful façade was a life filled with sorrow. This led some of their fellow participants to cry, out of an abundance of empathy.

For the next exercise, I divided the 22 participants into small groups and asked them to answer the question, “What is an Eco Warrior?” All trainees were literate, so I instructed each group member to write their ideas on a colored card and later asked each one to share and explain his/her idea to the other group members. As to be expected, all fared well in this exercise because they were conversing within their small group. But when I asked for volunteers

to share their answers in plenary, only one participant did.

In the next step, I asked participants to answer the question, "What are the ideal characteristics/attributes of an Eco-Warrior?" I was trying to draw out the ideal traits from the perspective of the IWCs, instead of having me, an outsider, who, although I am another Filipino, I am not from Palawan, nor their social class or profession. I applied the same approach in the next exercise. I asked training participants to answer the question, "What are your roles as an Eco-Warrior of Project Eco Kolek?" The question was intended to gauge participants' understanding of their role in the program. I thought that, through this approach, the IWCs could more easily express these pieces of information when needed as they introduce themselves to potential clients.

I also began to ask for volunteers from each table to share their answers with all the training participants. Then I asked other participants to share their answers. At this stage, the training participants had already begun to edge past their usual comfort zone since they were sharing with the whole class, although they were still staying within their small group tables.

### Conducting Training with Eco Warriors—Day 2

The following day, I challenged the group to go further. While seated at their tables, each participant had two minutes to share in plenary what s/he had learned from the previous day. Nine new participants arrived who were not present on Day 1, so they were exempted from this exercise. Many training participants were still nervous, perhaps because they didn't want to be perceived by their peers and trainer as not having learned much. As such, I had to call on one participant first

to share her key takeaways from the previous day, constantly encouraging her. After this, the other participants started volunteering to share their own ideas.

After several lecture/discussion sessions about interpersonal communication concepts, I asked participants to role-play for the first time in the training. The participants formed pairs; each member of the dyad assumed either the role of an Eco Warrior or that of a prospective household client. The pair then switched roles. This was now the beginning of applying all that they had learned from the previous sessions, but in a less anxiety-inducing setting because the IWCs were just in pairs and allowed to find a spot in the venue where they could do their role-play. Then I asked volunteers to re-enact the scenario again in plenary.

In the final exercise, I asked four pairs of volunteers to perform a role-play in front of everyone: participants playing Eco Warriors and members of the training team acting as clients. This was anxiety-provoking for the participants, but in the end, many were very glad that they had gone through it. IWCs expressed pride in themselves that they were able to overcome their nervousness and finish their role-play.

The last part of the training was a practicum, where the PZC staff and I brought the trainees to a community and asked them to apply their learnings by introducing themselves to the adult household member who was present. Most of the Eco Warriors did really well, and this time they didn't need a script. They had their pitch internalized. A few mothers were carrying their babies while talking with their prospective clients. They were also able to use a job aid on recyclable wastes that they could collect and sell.

As they started to gain confidence and of their own volition, training participants visited other

### Figure 2

*A Female Eco Warrior (in Yellow Uniform) Role-Playing in Plenary With a Male Staff Member of PZC.*

(Photo by Raul Caceres)



households in addition to the ones assigned to them. One male Eco Warrior even proceeded to talk to people on his own, without a partner. A female Eco Warrior said:

*Sobrang kabado po ko tuwing may microphone at magshashare ng ideas sa grupo namin o sa buong klase. Pero nung lumabas na po sa community at makipagkwentuhan tungkol sa 'min bilang Eco Warriors at ang Eco Kolek, madali lang po pala at masaya. (I was too nervous every time I had to hold the microphone and share our ideas to our group*

### Figure 3

*Eco Warriors Conducting Their Field Practicum. In the foreground is a pile of wood trash that remains uncollected by the formal SWM system. Residents did not know what to do with such large items.*

(Photo by Raul Caceres)



**Figure 4**

*Two Eco Warriors Explain to the Hotel Managers the Types of Wastes That Can Be Recycled.*

(Photo by PZC)



or to the whole class/plenary. But when we were already in the community and started to talk to the households/neighbors and shared who we are as Eco Warriors and what is Eco Kolek, we realized that it's just easy and fun.)

### **Inconsistent Attendance at the Training Sessions**

On the first day, there were 22 participants (17 women and five men). On Day 2, two women and one man who had attended Day 1 were absent, but seven women and two men who were new participants arrived, for a total of 28 participants. I discussed the inconsistent number of participants with the PZC staff, and they acknowledged that many were unable to attend Day 1 because they were at work. The same was also the case with the three Day 1 participants who didn't return.

Only 20 Eco Warriors consistently attended both Day 1 and Day 2. Then on Day 3, the practicum, only 12 arrived (11 women and one man). I deduced from this and conversations with the Eco Warrior that a 3-day training for informal waste collectors is probably too long. I also observed that toward the late afternoon of Day 1, participants looked exhausted and were participating less. It might have been because it was mentally and psychologically exhausting to participate in brainstorming and role plays. They appeared unaccustomed to doing that for extended periods. So on Day 2, I adjusted and let participants go home earlier. It appears that duration (time and total number of days) should be key considerations in designing training for IWCs:

I was also inspired by how they (trainers) motivated our impact leaders to speak

and voice out their values, and boosted their self-confidence to share their ideas in front of their fellow Eco Warriors (i.e., from their assigned partner to the small learning team, and then to the whole class). (Shellemai Roa, Deputy Project Director, Project Eco-Kolek)

*Dati hindi ako nakakapagsalita basta sa harap ng tao. Ngayon andito na ako....* (In the past, I couldn't speak when in front of other people. Here I am now....) (Eco Warrior)

### **Conclusion**

With careful training that is tailored to the local realities of this group of IWCs, training can gradually draw them out from their "shell," that is, the tendency to stick to themselves and their peers. After this IPC training, and with more opportunities to practice what they learned, the Eco Warriors had increased confidence in their ability to interact with others. This newly acquired skill and poise is expected to open more opportunities for doing business and self-improvement. There is evidence that the training has done this: Eco-Warriors were able to use these skills and new-found self-confidence to talk with managers of malls and department stores and to be able to participate in negotiations for agreements to collect waste from these businesses.

### **Reference**

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