The world’s current social and economic reality has generated a new dynamic of cooperation and solidarity across all economic sectors. Three factors are transforming the economic and social scenario: decreased participation of the public sector, the growing social and environmental responsibility of private firms, and the visible increase in the number of civil society organizations. The capitalist economic model generated an astonishing increase in consumption due to the decrease in product life cycle, cheapening of prices generated by new technologies and a higher accessibility of products to consumers. This exacerbated consumption accentuated waste production, and increased the amount solid residues being discarded in the environment. When these residues do not receive adequate treatment, they end up causing serious environmental, social and sanitary problems.

Besides the environmental aspect, a serious social problem is associated with this type of rubbish - the adults and children who see in urban garbage a means of survival. In addition to feeding on “damaged or contaminated food leftovers, they handle scrap glass and iron, chemical and toxic residues, becoming exposed to accidents and diseases” (ABREU, 2001). Garbage collectors are also prey to opportunistic middle persons or brokers because their lack of formal education allied with the cold reality of subsistence and their inability to organize themselves effectively enables brokers to appropriate the surplus generated by the recyclable waste collection. There are even cases in which collectors exchange collected material for food.

Entrepreneurial initiatives such as garbage collectors’ cooperatives have attempted to deal with this problem. Latin America has a growing number of enterprises by low-income individuals involved in collecting solid residue from urban garbage. Many of them belong to political movements, which provide institutional support.

Even when they seek other forms of corporate structures, following the specific legislation of each country, these enterprises exhibit cooperative work organization characteristics and economic production relations. In other words, they are collective property enterprises, democratically managed and made up of people who gather to fulfill common economic, social and cultural needs. Such similarities are not casual and reflect the trend to establish organizations motivated by solidarity economy rather than the business architecture of market economy. Democracy, equality, equity and solidarity values all serve as the basis for such initiatives, which are motivated not just by the generation of wealth but also the improvement they produce in workers’ self-esteem and dignity.

In light of the above, this work shows how these Latin American initiatives appear, develop and consolidate as they overcome obstacles and create opportunities in the adverse environments in which they operate. It analyzes their participation in the solid residue management chain. It presents the social initiatives of El Ceibo Urban Collectors (Argentina); Porvenir Recyclers’ Cooperative (Colombia); ASMARE – Association of Paper, Cardboard and Recyclable Material Collectors, PRO-Recife and Cata-sampa network (Brazil). These enterprises seek to become part of the supply chain of solid residue management, itself becoming a driving sector in the modern economy.

The study of these five enterprises has increased our knowledge of the development of social entrepreneurship in the solid waste recycling sector. In general terms, the cases studied reveal that the institutionalization of solid waste collection and the handling and sale of solid residues transform these people’s social and economic conditions, either through the generation of income where it was previously non-existent, or through the construction of more dignified living conditions and access to citizenship rights. In addition, the more articulated and diversified these organizations become, the more opportunities for social
transformation for collectors there are, and the better the sustainability conditions of the enterprises in which they participate. Besides that, some of these enterprises are increasing dialogue with firms and developing new ways of cooperating with the supply chains. The great challenge now is to strengthen these enterprises so that they can further contribute to local development, which will be achieved as they increase scale of production. Consequently it is essential that governments establish public policies which prioritize partnerships with these enterprises.

References


