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## Los cartoneros: a case study examining the role of cooperatives in post-crisis Argentina

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In late December, 2001, Argentina's economy came to a grinding halt. As the country finally defaulted on accumulating international debts, banks were frozen and commerce halted. A frenzied public forced the President from the Casa Rosada, and for five weeks Argentina was leaderless. The streets of Buenos Aires were crowded with thousands of protestors (Jordan & Whitney, 2003). Since the early 1990's, when unemployment was around six percent, the number of jobless citizens had been on the rise, hovering between 16 and 18 percent in the late 1990's and reaching 25 percent in many parts of the country by 2002. At this time, close to half of the Argentine people were living in poverty, up from around 15 percent in 1991. The Argentine peso, fixed at a set rate with the U.S dollar since 1992, was set loose in the open market, devaluing to \$0.26 dollars per peso by June of 2002 (Whitson, 2007). Having watched jobs disappear and the economy crumble over the course of several years, by late 2001 the Argentine people were in state of desperation. With only sparse social services to counteract the devastation (Romero, 2007), the public quickly mobilized, setting up temporary infrastructure to provide relief to the masses of unemployed.

The purpose of this research is to delve into this moment in history and explore a peoples' reaction to crippling economic conditions. By examining a specific worker-run effort within a greater social movement from this time, this research attempts to exemplify a work model that proved to be successful during a crisis and has flourished since, becoming a mainstay in Argentine society. Social movement theory is used to explain and understand specific human activities and the greater social changes that occurred during this time period.

The work model to be analyzed, a community-based cooperative structure, evolved as a specific response to the economic, social and political conditions from that time. By 2002, thousands of unemployed men and women began to form cooperatives, returning to old jobs or creating new work in groups designed to divide income equally between all members. Around the country, an estimated 10,000 people participated in cooperative groups working in their former places of employment (Backwell, 2003). Also in 2002, Argentine scholar Francisco Suárez estimated that in Buenos Aires alone, 25,000 people engaged in the practice of picking through city garbage and recovering recyclable materials to be sold for a small profit (Koehs, 2007). Within this massive number of *cartoneros*, the name given to the waste-pickers, who usually searched for cardboard cartons, many thousands formed similarly structured work cooperatives, designed to support their informal yet lucrative approach to recycling. Due to the rapidly evolving nature of their work, cartoneros often relied on community support to guide their efforts. Both a symbol of the changing Argentine economy and a compelling example of worker-run cooperatives, the actions of a group of cartoneros were chosen to guide and inform this research.

By focusing on informal waste-pickers who chose to work in cooperative groups (versus independently) this research seeks to explain to what extent cooperatives were successful in mobilizing workers and other resources during the time period 2002-2009, and in what ways workers benefited from participating in cooperative groups. This report also discusses how different social actors interacted to stabilize the unemployed under challenging economic and social conditions, and analyzes the role of cooperative participants and the cartoneros as actors within a greater social movement during this

time period. Using a case study approach, the worker cooperative model is understood through the experience of El Ceibo, an established cooperative group that has spearheaded the movement of cartoneros into the mainstream in recent years. This research helps to explain the factors that led worker run cooperatives to flourish in a depressed economic climate (Paiva, 2008, Reynals, 2007), and have contributed to stabilizing the unemployed over the course of the last decade.

#### History: Political and Economic Changes: 1983-2001

In order to address the questions posed by this report, a basic understanding of the political, economic and social factors that surround these issues is vital. The conditions under which thousands of Argentines were driven to waste-picking for survival are the same conditions that led to complete economic collapse in 2001. Though at one time a nation known for its exports and domestic growth, Argentina has been constantly challenged with political instability, oppressive military rule, hyperinflation and finally a rapid and poorly managed entrance into the global economy of the 1990s. Referring in large part to Argentine historian and professor, Luis Alberto Romero, following is a brief retelling of the political and economic events most relevant to the state in which Argentina finds herself today.

Following the end of a seven-year military dictatorship (1976-1983), Argentina shakily returned to voting democratically. Newly elected president Raúl Alfonsín of the Radical Civic Union (UCR) struggled to cope with international debt incurred during the previous regime, and economic hardship ensued. Beholden to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as well as private creditors, the president eventually backed out of office

early, and Carlos Menem was elected in 1989 with promises to turn around Argentina's devastated economy.

President Menem entered office during a major fiscal crisis, marked by extreme hyperinflation and a violent and disruptive public. Pressed to restore order, he acted quickly, looking outside of Argentina for guidance and financial support (Romero, 2007). Under the direction of the IMF, Menem took rapid measures to open up his national economy to the global economy (Whitson, 2007). At that time, U.S and international financial organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank were recommending and even requiring such changes if they were to come to aid to nations grappling with foreign debt. Romero first describes these changes as "a program of austerity and capitalist restructuring", and later as "the most simple, crude, brutal and destructive" approach to neoliberal reformist prescriptions. These reforms were enacted in such a state of desperation that, while recommendations were carefully adhered to, important considerations were not taken. For example, while income and sales taxes were raised to quickly bolster the economy, an emphasis on saving and investment and social equality was overlooked (Romero, 2007).

Beginning in 1991, a series of ministry changes occurred and Domingo Cavallo, the former foreign minister took on the role of minister of the economy. Cavallo quickly worked to implement another daring reform program, which this time resulted in the passage of the Convertibility Law in 1992. The new peso was pegged to a fixed exchange rate with the American dollar, and the two were "henceforth" considered equal. The law prohibited the president from modifying exchange rates and forbid the printing of any money over the nation's dollar reserves. These restrictions, designed to prevent inflation

and devaluation of the peso, along with a decisive reduction of trade barriers, would quickly revitalize the economy and make Argentina trustworthy once again to foreign creditors.

For the period of 1991-1994, reform efforts continued, with privatization reaching into all sectors, notably the state-owned oil company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF) and part of the social security program. Strong international economics and revenue generated from the privatization programs worked bring the country completely out of deficit, masking, for a time, the rising unemployment levels that would soon develop as a result of many public to private conversion cutbacks. Increased productivity and economic growth during this time period bolstered an image of prosperity in Argentina (Whitson, 2007), encouraging the perceived success of these new policies. However, as the Argentine economy grew, many small businesses were forced to close in the face of an increasingly competitive private market. The high production costs limited export opportunities, especially as the U.S dollar rose in value in the mid-1990s, and soon the market was flooded by cheap, imported goods, swelling the commercial deficit and forcing an increasing number of local production out of the market (Romero, 2007).

As early as 1995, unemployment began to rise to unprecedented levels, reaching 18% when a Mexican economic crisis would scare millions of dollars in foreign investment out of Argentina and other Latin American nations. Though the economy recovered from this scare, unemployment did not and foreign debt began to grow steadily, reaching \$100 billion in 1996.<sup>1</sup> It was at this time that scavengers began to

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1. In the late 1990's, Cavallo responded to economic uncertainty by continuing a regimen of privatization and by limiting state funds for social security and other services, alarming traditional Peronists who felt the government was so tied to the IMF that state needs were no longer being met. At this time a divide in the party, which was quickly reforming itself under Menem's leadership, sparked social and political unrest around the country. After clashes over privatization attempts and finger pointing with regards to growing political corruption and conspiracy, Menem would remove Cavallo from office.

emerge in the cities, searching for valuable goods amongst discarded waste. Prior to 2001, such scavengers were typically referred to as *cirujas*, or surgeons, and represented only a few thousand people in the city of Buenos Aires.

A combination of difficult international economic crises, to which Argentina was now intrinsically linked, would further rile the Argentine public. Unemployed workers and protesters would organize pickets and roadblocks, and though they were generally satisfied with small donations of food or with temporary work, their aggressive tactics were broadly replicated, deepening the public crisis. Street politics, popular in the 1960's would return, this time widely publicized by television coverage and other media sources.

Fernando de la Rúa was elected into office in 1999 and constrained by economic crisis and limited political power. Further weakened by the difficulty of transforming a political alliance into a governing force, the new government would enter the new millennium as leaders of a highly polarized society, with a massive deficit and heightened unemployment still on the rise. Though welcomed with enthusiasm, de la Rúa was forced to flee his presidential quarters in a helicopter on December 21, 2001, to a backdrop of a furious public frenzy and violent police response after he failed to stabilize the country. In anticipation of the worst for the flailing economy, citizens and investors alike had moved their money out of the country, eventually leaving the government unable to pay off international debts. Creditors withdrew and the economy soon collapsed completely. Banks were frozen by a *corrallito* (the “corral”) and a new state of crisis and panic, unlike any that had come before took hold of the entire nation.

In the weeks after de la Rúa's escape, four presidents would pass through office, repeatedly forced out by an enraged and often violent public. Protesting, which was

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already a mainstay leading up to the crisis would escalate, with participants ranging from the unemployed to middle class business people whose money was inaccessible in the frozen banking system. Striking returned and picketing and roadblocks were seemingly “endemic”. Unemployment had risen from 13% in 1999 to 20% in 2001, (Romero, 2007) with an additional 15.7% underemployed (Paiva, 2008) and lacking security in their work. Around 40% of Argentines were living below the federal poverty level and government work programs, one of only a few major relief measures, was applied only arbitrarily (Romero, 2007). In 2002 things only worsened before stability could come. After over a decade of convertibility, the peso was no longer pegged to the U.S dollar, and was now valued in accordance to the open market. By June of 2002, its value would fall to \$0.26 dollars per peso (Whitson, 2007). Massive numbers of unemployed workers banded together at this time, illegally returning to work in closed factories and businesses. In Buenos Aires, neighborhood groups began working to provide basic human services to community members, holding meetings on street corners and in abandoned buildings (Jordan & Whitney, 2003). Also out on the street, another social movement was taking place: In this chaotic but ingenious environment, a large-scale movement of unemployed-turned-self-employed waste pickers, or cartoneros, would enter the public eye (Paiva, 2008). In Buenos Aires, the employed and unemployed, destitute and organized, looked to one another and to hidden city resources for solutions and survival.

#### Resource Mobilization: Theoretical Framework

Social movement theory assists in analyzing a large-scale citizen response to a given set of circumstances during a given period of time. An interdisciplinary approach to

understanding human behavior, social movement theories consider the various factors that lead a movement to take place, as well as the possible outcomes of such a movement. A theoretical framework is useful in identifying important moments and social actors from within a larger movement, as a way to explain the logical development of social change. Theorists strive to define and explain the components that influence collective human behavior, and work to develop a framework for analysis that transcends time and place (McCarthy & Zald, 1987). In the United States, social movement theory has been used for decades to help understand and analyze human behaviors. In Argentina, the literature that addresses the topic of this report did not refer to specific theories but nevertheless addresses many of the same factors as scholars of U.S. social movements do. A brief introduction to social movement theory will assist in analyzing the successful cooperative work model used by cartoneros during the crisis years in Argentina.

In contemporary theory, two approaches dominate the study of social movements: the European based new social movement theory (NSM) and the older North American perspective, known as resource mobilization (RM). Resource mobilization was developed in response to the 1960's decade of historic social upheaval in the United States and around the world. The theory regards social movements as initiatives that are formed by rational social institutions and social actors who are taking action for a specific purpose (Buechler, 1999). Resource Mobilization focuses on how actors develop strategies, and interact with their environment in order to pursue their needs or interests, while the NSM perspective is more concerned with the identity of social movement participants, a response to the modern social movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, which were largely dominated by specific groups hoping to achieve social equality (Beuchler, 1999, Canel,

2004). In the case of Argentina, the movement in question was not propelled so much by a group marginalized because of their race, gender, sexuality or creed, but rather by thousands of unemployed workers who were concerned primarily with basic human needs. For this reason and because of its interest in the role of economics and organization, RM was the appropriate theoretical approach to guide this research and analysis.

Kendall (2001) continues to posit today that RM specifically focuses on participants' ability to identify and acquire resources, and the key role that such resources play in a particular social movement. Resources could include, but are not limited to, material or financial resources, moral resources (such as moral support or morals as they guide actions), social or organizational resources (strategizing, planning and the forming of networks), human resources (participants and supporters) and cultural resources which could include prior experience with mobilization or a collective understanding of imminent goals and obstacles.

In the case of the Argentine crisis, unemployed and underemployed workers and cartoneros would soon be identified by local scholars as important and sometimes critical actors in the social movements that would help guide some Argentine people out of poverty. Though such scholars do not adhere to the North American RM perspective, or even appear to be referring to SM theory to guide their work, their evaluation of the cartoneros' behavior addresses many areas of action and development that are key components of the RM theory. In particular, the identification of the cartoneros as important social actors during the early 21<sup>st</sup> century supports the use of a theoretical approach in studying this phenomenon.

The earliest developers of RM theory, McCarthy and Zald, adhere to what is now recognized as one of two camps of RM thought: the ‘organizational-entrepreneurial’ version of the theory. This model argues that there is little value in grievances when seeking to explain motivation for a social movement. Many groups in many times and places have had grievances without mobilizing, therefore disproving this as a critical factor in social movements. They argue that a group’s access to and control over necessary resources is crucial to social movement activity (Buechler, 2000).

Other focal points of the organizational model include organizational dynamics, leadership and resource management. This model applies economic and organizational theories to the study of social movements and makes reference to concepts such as social movement industries and organizations (Canal, 2004). Scholars in this school of thought argue that formal organizations act as carriers of social movements (Zald and McCarthy, 1987). The ‘political-interactive’ model, developed by Tilly, Gamson, Oberschall, McAdam in the 1970’s, uses a political model to examine social movements and focuses on changes in power structures and pre-existing networks within mobilized groups (Canal, 2004).

This analysis will primarily look to the original organizational model as a guide in applying the theory of RM to the post-crisis events in Argentina because it emphasizes organizational leadership and resource management, two focal components of the cooperative that is explored. It also considers economic principles, which played a crucial role in the social movement in question. This analysis, in line with the organizational model of the RM theory, suggests that a social movement was carried by “formal” organizations, if not that the organizations in question are a social movement in and of

themselves. It describes motivating factors for forming such organizations and uses basic economic principles to explain why these organizations, which are cooperatives, were successful in achieving their goals.

Resource mobilization theorists place emphasis on the importance of social actors' ability to strategically gather and utilize resources towards their cause, including not only physical resources, but also social, political and organizational ones. The same theorists argue that the importance of organizing these resources is greater than the desire to effect change. As revealed by the history portion of this report, Argentina had been in a state of social and political upheaval for years before the social movement under analysis rose to the surface. It was the moment when desire to create change was aligned with the correct conditions necessary for social actors to mobilize and work towards changing their situation. Based on this theory, a case-study method is used to analyze the conditions, motivations and resources of a specific cooperative group whose actions are representative of a large number of social actors from this time period.

### Methods

This research formed in response to a visit to Mexico in the summer of 2007, where primary interactions with successful cooperative organizations took place. While in this case the cooperative participants were primarily indigenous women living in a rural setting with very few available resources, the work model seemed to transcend the experience of this specific population. One and a half years later, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, this project began, seeking amongst dozens of recently formed urban cooperatives a case-study worthy group that would exemplify the popular use of the cooperative work model in a very different setting.

Guided by Resource Mobilization theory, this research analyzes a case study that was selected to represent the activities of thousands of unemployed Argentine citizens following the economic collapse of 2001. A case study approach serves to explore in depth the formation and implementation of a functional cooperative during this time period, referring to RM theory as a means of understanding how and why cooperatives were used in this situation. Case studies emphasize detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and work to strengthen existing research with specific supporting examples. Researcher Robert K. Yin defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1984).

The case of El Ceibo, a woman-led, neighborhood based cooperative from the Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires, is representative of the motivation and process behind forming a cooperative and similarly, embodies many of the critical social interactions that contributed to the larger growth of the cooperative social movement. A detailed analysis of the formation of El Ceibo provides insight into the development of cooperatives as a recovery approach for thousands of unemployed workers and community members during the earliest years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in post-crisis Argentina.

North American and later Argentine journalistic accounts and academic publications were used to understand the sentiment of this time period and events that led to the crisis and resulting social activities. In this context, a sector of the cooperative-based workforce was identified and following a series of uneventful site visits outside of the city of Buenos Aires, a geographic area within the city was determined. Referring to a

small but high quality selection of academic reports written by Argentine scholars, an in-depth understanding of the activities of this group led to the selection of El Ceibo as a model cooperative.

Referring again to media sources in conjunction with academic reporting on El Ceibo, a fuller picture of this work group was formed, leading to the assertion that they are not only representative of a larger body of workers from this time period, and that their organization played a significant role in the development and expansion of a greater movement of cartoneros, but that their activities also align closely with the theoretical perspective that guides this research.

### Findings

By analyzing the case of El Ceibo, this report describes trends in community organizing during the post-crisis months and years in Argentina, specifically as they pertain to the worker cooperatives. Theory helps to explain motivating factors for seemingly sudden cooperative action and aids in understanding the great significance of the social, political and economic climate in shaping the behavior of thousands of Argentine citizens in months and years following the collapse. Similarly, the case of El Ceibo supports the various assumptions put forward by RM theorists. The fundamental principles of RM theory explain the importance of resource acquisition, the role of organization leadership and resource management, and how a social movement such as the rapid growth of community run recycling programs analyzed in this report is “carried” by formal organizations such as El Ceibo and other cooperatives.

### Background: The History of El Ceibo

The cooperative El Ceibo came to be the focal point of this paper for a few simple reasons: They are a well established cooperative, were on the forefront of what I will refer to as the “cartonero movement” in the early 2000s, and remain active today. In fact, El Ceibo continues to make history, and all along has been headed by a motivational, female leader named Cristina Lescano. Though El Ceibo is just one group, their case reflects the multi-faceted, community-based approach to social recovery that was prominent around the time of the crisis. Their activities and the role that the cooperative played in the larger sphere of social change during this time period are considered by RM theorists to be essential elements of a social movement. In order to analyze El Ceibo as a representative case of a worker’s cooperative in the context of a greater social movement, it is necessary to first understand their history and motivation for forming.

Cristina Lescano is a community organizer and an activist and her history begins during a former economic crisis, in the year 1989. The year that President Menem entered office, Argentina suffered with severe hyperinflation and widespread social unrest. At the time, Lescano and her *vecinas* (female neighbors) came to organize over a simple issue: birth control pills. The hyperinflation had moved the price of contraceptives out of an affordable range, and seven women, including Lescano, decided to get together to work on a solution. They already had multiple children and felt committed to “responsible procreation”. Lescano notes that at this time, the topic of “occupying”, or squatting in an abandoned building was taboo. In getting together to work on a family planning issue, the women came to realize that each one of them was living in an occupied building. In this way, their organization formed. It was named El Ceibo Trabajo Barrial (Neighborhood

Work), and had activities in Palermo and Villa Crespo, two Buenos Aires neighborhoods (Reynals, 2003).

This organization was referred to during this time period as La Cooperativa de Vivienda, or The Living Coop, and was founded on the idea of working and producing as a coordinated effort, with the intention of improving the neighborhood's living conditions. They hoped that these fundamentals could apply more broadly, as social solutions, in a nation that was at that time still freshly recovering from a brutal dictatorship, and was in a seemingly impossible financial bind.

The Living Coop principally sought to dignify their work and lives, and to improve quality of life through integrated and sustainable programming derived from the community. From the beginning they valued and relied upon neighborhood participation in their efforts. In these early years of their work, the strategy was education and outreach; to understand what people had, or knew how to do, and what they lacked or needed. Lescano saw this as “very different from letting them know what they have to do...” (Reynals, 2003).

The first effort featured an all-female administration, which collaborated with various other organizations to address the issue of illegally occupied housing. Two new laws results from this effort, under the category of Emergency Housing, which allowed access to interest-free loans for the cost of living for families living in occupied buildings (Reynals, 2003). In this way, this group rose to the forefront of cooperative community organizing efforts, linking in with numerous networks and working on various community-based projects, including HIV awareness programs and an academic

scholarship program. They continued to contribute to local commissions and to influence city policies.

At the turn of the 21st century, the Living Coop became involved in the recycling collection efforts that were becoming so prominent during the current economy. Like so many others, their community was challenged by widespread unemployment, greater even than it had been at the time of their formation. An organization dedicated to supporting the cooperative work model, called the Instituto Movilizador de Fondos Cooperativos (IMFC) was already aware of Lescano's group, so when neighborhood members, some of whom already had a background in waste picking, got in touch it was not long before the IMFC contacted Lescano to see if she wanted to form a cooperative of recuperadores, or cartoneros. This seemed to be a perfect match for the Living Coop; they were already dedicated to "generating the resources they needed for...dignified work" and had already formed a working cooperative. Over the course of two years they would design and put into operation the recycling cooperative, named El Ceibo. Soon, their activities would rise to the forefront of the cartonero movement.

### Analysis

Three main points of Resource Mobilization theory; resource acquisition, the role of organization leadership and resource management, and how a social movements are "carried" by formal organizations; can be explained and discussed in the context of the social movement that occurred in Argentina during a post-crisis time period. Each major point works to answer one of the three research questions that are considered by this report. The case of El Ceibo guides the use of RM theory in understanding the role of cooperatives and the social achievements that they supported.

1. Resource Acquisition: This report considers the extent to which cooperatives were successful in mobilizing workers and other resources during the time period of the crisis. Scholars of resource mobilization theory emphasize the importance of a social movement participants' ability to identify and acquire resources. As according to Diana Kendall (2001), resources can be material, financial, moral, social, organizational, human, and cultural. In the case of El Ceibo, a variety of such resources were available to Lescano and her community at the time of the crisis, encouraging the group to engage in, and act as leaders to an emerging social movement made up of unemployed workers who were turning to recycling as a means of survival.

Prior to the crisis in 2001, Lescano was already active in community organizing and accustomed to identifying and accessing resources to support her group's early efforts. A united understanding of and commitment to addressing community issues guided the behavior and cooperation of the original cooperative members and increasingly organized activities strengthened and legitimized efforts for change in the world of recycling. Resource Mobilization theory would argue that the reaction to the 2001 crisis did not occur in a vacuum, and that cooperative members were able to draw from their former experiences and apply knowledge of small scale community organizing to the new, more challenging situation.

Those who would form El Ceibo as it exists today were keenly aware of how to gather and use resources, including human resources in the community, and were therefore prepped for their entrance into the informal world of waste-picking and recycling. In addition to the human, organizational, monetary and other resources identified by this theory, RM supports the identification of recyclables as a resource that

was mobilized as a response to the economic conditions of this time period. Recyclable materials had been present prior to this social movement, but in response to a specific set of conditions (financial crisis, unemployment, and changes in the value of the peso) they were suddenly identified as a specific resource and were pursued, organized and processed in a structured manner. However, while thousands of unemployed workers were able to identify, locate and collect this valuable “waste”, only specific actors formed work cooperatives, further benefitting from other less tangible “resources”, such as leadership, networks and member experience with/knowledge of community organizing (Reynals, 2003, Schamber & Suarez, 2007)

2. Organizational Leadership and Resource Management: This report considers the ways in which workers benefitted from participating in cooperatives. McCarthy and Zald (1987) emphasize the importance of understanding the collective behavior of social movements, and how attention to details such as cost-reducing mechanisms or structures, career benefits and other incentives helps to explain the actions of social movement participants. In the case of El Ceibo and the cartoneros, these details are present and clearly explain the decisive formation of cooperatives.

Schamber and Suárez (2007) explain that “the prices of the [collected recyclable] materials determined a level of minimum activity” that cartoneros would undertake for their work to be productive and worthwhile. They are referring to the same basic economic principle that guided McCarthy and Zald to stress the importance of cost-reducing structures in a social movement. First, the reduced value of the peso beginning in 2002 and the increased worth of recyclables led waste-picking to quickly become a lucrative activity (Paiva, 2008, Schamber and Suárez, 2007). Second, by collaborating,

cartoneros were able to optimize their resources and increase the value of their work (Reynals, 2003). A common practice was to group all collected materials before making a single sale to a recycling purchaser, as a way to secure a higher return for the bulk price. In addition to securing a higher price through making cooperative sales to a recycling processor, there are also reported instances of a *chatarrero* (the recycling purchaser) providing security and services to regular cartonero clients. This may include fair prices (comparable to fair wages) and assistance for “sickness or basic needs” (Reynals, 2003). This resembles quite clearly the benefits associated with working in a formal, professional setting. Even relatively early on, having done her research within about one year after the full collapse of the economy, Reynals saw this trend as very significant. In her report she notes that, by offering benefits to consistent and committed cartoneros, the chatatteros helped to legitimize this work, take ownership of the trade and “accumulate political capital”, allowing them to “put pressure” on the local government.

The high cost-benefit outcome of group work in the informal recycling process is one way that cooperative members could benefit from working together. However, the success of these cooperative efforts is largely attributable to strong leadership, such as that provided by Cristina Lescano. Though monetarily she benefitted no more or no less than her cooperative members, by drawing on her prior experiences and other resources, such as connections to other community organizers, she played an important role in guiding her cooperative in ways that increased the cost benefits of their work. Resource Mobilization argues that this kind of leadership drives a social movement. In the case of the cartoneros (those participating in cooperatives and others), seasoned community organizers such as Lescano worked to secure rights and benefits for her own group which

worked to legitimize waste-picking, something that effected all participants in this emerging activity. In time, El Ceibo and other cooperatives would establish infrastructure for working cartoneros that would bring this activity further into the mainstream. Within a year of the crisis, cartoneros had established daycare (or night-care, as many worked only during the wee hours) centers for children too young to waste-pick with their families, food kitchens and notably, special train services allocated by the city (after influential lobbying from organized groups) which were used to bring cartoneros and their carts from the city limits into the center after the end of business hours. One such train, El Tren Blanco, is considered a major achievement of these workers, as it marks an early effort to gain political support for their work by securing transportation and access rights from the city of Buenos Aires (Reynals, 2003; Koehs, 2008).

3. Social Movement Carried by Organizations: The final question put forth by this research pertains to how cartoneros and cooperatives such as El Ceibo played a role within a greater movement towards social and economic stabilization after the crisis in Argentina.

In an article published in 2006, Marcela Valente discusses how cartoneros have contributed to large-scale changes in Buenos Aires' recycling industry and policies. The title of this article, *Transforming Garbage into Decent Jobs*, seems to summarize this social movement, and brings to mind the early slogan of the cartoneros, *El Trabajo no es Basura* (Work is not Garbage). As Schamber and Suárez emphasize, the motivation of all cartoneros was initially to find work. Waste-picking developed as a matter of survival, notable for having few requirements (a cart and a pair of hands) and providing somewhat immediate returns (Schamber and Suárez, 2007). The large-scale changes that occurred

as a result could never have been predicted but are what now define the social movement of unemployed workers and their success in working with communities and the local government to create jobs and designate rights and services to thousands of new waste-pickers in Buenos Aires.

Through cooperative action and persistent networking, cartoneros made notable headway in the socio-political realm between 2002 and 2009. In accordance with RM theory, this progress was guided by the organized cooperatives that used their community status to lobby affectively for changes that would in the end affect all waste-pickers. While such achievements are numerous, there are three that show the measured progress of this social movement.

First, cooperatives such as El Ceibo worked to establish a presence in the communities where they did their waste picking. By communicating with neighbors they achieved recognition for their work, effectively ameliorating the stigma attached to cartoneros, who had formerly been associated with homelessness and crime. Lescano describes this as a process of legitimization, something that she had worked to achieve for other community projects in the past. In addition to securing respect from neighbors, El Ceibo also worked with communities to establish the first instance of waste-separation. This small change prevented contamination of recyclables by non-recyclables and allowed for a more streamlined and lucrative collection process (Reynals, 2003).

Second, cartoneros influenced a change in the law that formerly had made their work illegal. During the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, General Osvaldo Cacciatore prohibited both recycling and the act of waste picking, presumably to extend the control of his military government to this population. In 2002, though the law was still in place,

steps were already being taken towards legitimizing the cartoneros' work; El Ente de Control de los Servicios Públicos approved a pilot program that was picked up by two cooperatives, Nuevo Rumbo and El Ceibo. The program allowed a limited, cooperative collection service that required standardized, orange collection bags to be distributed to neighbors in a thirty block radius. Members of El Ceibo participated in door knocking and neighborhood outreach. This method was also used to educate neighbors about the cartoneros' work and to encourage them to separate their recyclables from their waste, something that had been outlawed since the 1970's. El Ceibo focused their work in the central Buenos Aires neighborhood of Palermo and were approved by the City Government in August of 2002 (Reynals, 2003). In 2003, soon after the publication of Reynals' article, the Ley 922/03 passed, removing the sanctions on waste picking, allowing cartoneros to legally expand their work, further legitimizing the recollection process and moving it into the realm of "work" as opposed to "scavenging" (Schamber and Suárez, 2007).

Third, in late 2005, a new law on "Integral Management of Solid Urban Waste", went into effect, as part of a collaborative effort with the international agency Green Peace (Valente, 2006). According to the international report, this law foments "rational consumption" and recycling and is designed to gradually bring about decent working conditions for the cartoneros. It is more commonly known as the "Zero Garbage Law" and has garnered the attention of the international environmental community. In response to the dedicated efforts of Buenos Aires cooperatives, the Buenos Aires city government "sponsored the organization of cooperatives of garbage scavengers" and provided space for the first warehouse. While the law is designed to greatly reduce the amount of waste

that is put into landfills, it also marks the most significant achievement of the cartoneros in their effort to create a legitimate space for their work in the public sector. In addition to creating more pilot programs that require recyclables to be separated from non-recyclable waste, the law stated that participating companies would be responsible for the construction of five new recycling centers. These centers would be run by cooperatives of cartoneros (Valente, 2006).

In the space of only a few years, cartoneros went from occupying a fringe role in society, to mobilizing during the height of the crisis, establishing work groups and campaigning for rights, to effectively inspiring wide-spread changes in the local law. Along the way, Argentina acknowledged solid waste and recycling as issues that could be managed and controlled. In addition to providing work for thousands, a rapidly developing recycling industry has contributed to the exportation of new materials (citation) and is predicted to help reduce the environmental strain of landfills and incinerators in the coming decades.

#### Implications and Limitations

This research uses a case study approach to prove the worth of Resource Mobilization theory. In turn, this theory works to explain the logical progression of the activities of the cartoneros after the height of the crisis in 2001. A greater understanding of the post crisis time period is achieved, with the work of the cartoneros providing an example of how informal recycling, one of many attempts to create economic and social stability at the community level, has quickly become a societal mainstay. Though this research does not describe or consider other corresponding social recovery efforts it

captures the general sentiment of the time and focuses on a well established population of informal workers.

Through a deeper understanding of El Ceibo and the role of social actors such as Cristina Lescano, the value of cooperatives as a work model during times of limited resources is considered. Though the thousands of cartoneros who do not participate in work cooperatives were not highlighted, a greater understanding of their role in the movement towards establishing a recycling industry in Buenos Aires is nevertheless achieved.

Finally, while not the intention of this report, an important environmental issue is inadvertently brought to light. While the international community watched with interest as Argentina's workers mobilized to recover lost jobs and stabilize a flailing economy, an equal if not greater audience was drawn to the phenomenon of the cartoneros, as Buenos Aires quickly accepted the introduction of a recycling industry that will save millions of pounds of waste from entering landfills in the coming decades. As nations around the world place a heightened emphasis on environmental issues, the world's waste pickers are shed in a new light and for some have become the heroes of the new "green" movement (Goldstein, 2008, Inclusive Cities, 2010).

#### Conclusion: Beyond the Crisis

This report promotes the use of a case study approach in understanding the occurrence and logical progression of social movements. It uses Resource Mobilization theory to draw out key components of a greater social movement and by focusing on a single case, simultaneously tells a unique story and aids in understanding a complex, contemporary movement. El Ceibo represents the required components of a successful

cooperative, a driving force behind the success of this movement, and while this group is a specific example, their case exemplifies an approach that is broadly replicable and has been used in communities throughout Buenos Aires, Argentina and many other parts of the world.

This research argues that the cooperative work model successfully mobilized unemployed workers, providing organization and other resources to cartoneros. El Ceibo offered protection to participants and helped to establish cartoneros in a specific region of the city where they collaborate with the neighborhood to legitimize their work. Workers benefitted from these relationships and from other networking initiatives through increased revenue for their collected material and a variety of services that were secured by organizations of cartoneros. Through the combined efforts of El Ceibo, other cooperatives and all cartoneros, rapid changes to local policy and the culture of recycling occurred, bringing this new market to the forefront of the public conscience. Today cartoneros enjoy the recognition and support of society and benefit from new laws that require the expansion of recycling infrastructure, in which they have a determined place.

In a global context, this report serves as a reminder of the fragility of international economic policies, especially when enacted without careful checks and balances in place. Although Argentina has made a dramatic recovery since the crisis, the thousands of cartoneros who continue to rely on discarded waste serve as a visible reminder of the difficulties faced by the nation's impoverished. Community organizing will continue to serve a purpose, filling a void that government policies cannot fill. The case of El Ceibo serves as reminder of the merits of community organizing during times of political and economic distress.

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