



Chapter 7

Improving Collectors' Lives

The main purpose of this study was to identify ways that the lives of Belgrade's Collectors could be improved, not to identify ways to improve City waste management. The City can improve its waste management system through various means of mechanization and privatization without regard to its thousands of chronically poor citizens who scavenge waste for a living. It is our obligation, however, to consider first the lives of our people and secondly the efficiency of our waste disposal services. This book is about achieving social justice for those forced to scavenge solid wastes simply to survive. As Rajko Djuric says in the Foreword, "If a man is still aware of a concept of humanity, and if he knows that righteousness before all is a responsibility towards others, he would then have to at least ask himself: is there any hope that this decay of human souls in the pits of our dumps will ever be stopped?"

Those closest to the problem usually can suggest the best solutions. But there are two sides to this coin: the side of those picking solid waste and the side of the City of Belgrade. These two groups working together can probably find solutions that would help the Collectors and improve City services. We asked both groups for their opinions.

Collectors' viewpoints

The Collectors we interviewed did not see themselves as part of the City's waste collection system but rather viewed their work as their private businesses. As such, they made suggestions in terms of improving their own working conditions and making investments in items such as trucks and protected community recycling centers to improve their income. Many would like to have permanent employment in waste management, but they realize that the City would be unlikely to hire all who scavenge waste, therefore for them the better option, considering the almost complete lack of other income-generating options, is to remain independent collectors and simply improve their work conditions.



A PAPER LIFE

Mayling Simpson-Hebert



Photograph 19. Cukarica family

Both men and women claim that scavenging would be improved, above all, by good transportation (better carts and trucks) and by the separation of solid wastes into separate bins, such as bottles, aluminum, paper, cardboard, clothing, and so forth, and by cleaner solid waste bins. Many have been to Germany and worked in public sanitation and see the German way of solid waste separation and collection as being superior. They said with these improvements, scavenging would be safer and more efficient, and they could specialize in particular items.

They also would like to have their 'own dump.' That is, they would like to be owners of dumps where solid waste is deposited and they would operate it as a private business. They would pick through the solid waste and sell the recyclables privately. They would be in control and could improve their communities. Collectors said they would like to have a safe, fenced location where they could store items that they bring to their settlements while waiting to sell them. They would like to have canvases to cover the goods so they would not get scattered around and not ruined by the rain. Several said they would like to have their own recycling plants erected for various types of goods.



7. IMPROVING COLLECTORS' LIVES

Collectors said would like to have protective clothing and shoes and to have uniforms so that people would recognize them as workers and stop harassing them. They would also like to have permanent employment with solid waste collection companies, or to have work permits issued to them, legalizing their informal work, and to have fixed prices for each type of item. They would like to be able to buy a vehicle or even just a motor that can be repaid in installments. They would like to have their 'payments' free of taxes.

They also said they would like to be respected because they are honest, knowledgeable about the job and are capable of doing it well. They would like protection from the dump authorities. Some said they would like to have their own 'trade union'.

In addition women said they want to "enjoy respect from the citizens" and some kind of protection and safety. For them the 'protection and safety' is very important, and most of them believe that the job would be much easier and better if there existed "some care and protection" and if they could have "work permits and uniforms - protection clothes" and "free medical checkups from time to time". They also hope for permanent employment "at least in this type of job" or at least "so we can be sure of selling whatever we manage to collect".

Those who pick through solid waste at the City dump have some more specific expectations. They are now barred from working and they want to be able to work. As the road leading from the dump is closed to them and any vehicles they might own, they have to carry their loads on foot a couple of kilometers to a main road. They want the road opened to them and they want water and electricity in their settlement. They also want protective clothing, masks and gloves and better settlement hygiene.

Viewpoints of the public service institutions

From the viewpoint of the City of Belgrade, there are at least three issues related to solid waste. One is how domestic solid waste should be removed from unhygienic illegal settlements. A second is how to deal with the 'economic' solid waste (recyclables) that is brought to these same settlements by Collectors for re-sale to buyers. A third issue is how to modernize solid waste collection in the City and for the City to get the profit from the discarded items that can be recycled.

For the first and second issues, the City has plans to allow certain currently illegal settlements to remain, to demolish other illegal settlements, and to build some new settlements with modern amenities. The City authorities are determined to accomplish these changes. The Secretariat for the Protection of the Living Environment has proposed a pilot project in the unhygienic settlements to improve the overall standard of living. The draft suggests the following:

For settlements that would be retained, they will pave the streets with asphalt, have domestic solid waste removal services, would construct public bathrooms and toilets, and establish



A PAPER LIFE

mini-collection centers for 'economic' solid waste in cooperation with Public Sanitation. Thus Collectors in some settlements would get recycling centers that would be owned by the City of Belgrade in which they would either be employed or they could sell their items to the City.

For settlements to be demolished, the City would set up temporary large containers for the collection of recyclables and the City would buy the recyclable items from the Collectors. Also, domestic solid waste would be collected on a daily basis. After these settlements are demolished, Collectors would have to move elsewhere, ideally to new planned settlements.

New planned settlements will replace the settlements to be demolished. Candidates for new housing would be people who can prove they were born in Belgrade, who accept a job in one of the City's public utility services, such as GSP (Public Transportation Enterprise), Gradska Cistoca (City Sanitation), Gradsko Zelenilo (City Park Maintenance), and who agree to keep their children in school. Residents will not be allowed to be Collectors or to bring recyclables into the new settlements.

This plan leaves out all Collectors who were not born in Belgrade, which might include up to half of all people scavenging. The City does not want the Roma displaced by the recent wars and by poverty in south Serbia to remain in the City. They are hoping to be able to send them back to their original towns.

As for the third issue of modernizing the City's solid waste management, they plan to privatize solid waste collection services. *Different officials interviewed offered their opinions that it would be desirable, in some way, to legalize the activities of some or all Collectors.* The City feels that informal Collectors need permits and protective clothing.

For the City dump at Vinca, the City feels that Collectors working informally there now should be hired and given protective clothing. They feel that somehow the solid waste collection services of the City of Belgrade have to be made more profitable by modernizing equipment, proper separation of solid waste materials, and fixing prices for items between sellers and buyers. The City could make contracts with Collectors to collect certain items, such as hazardous wastes or car batteries. These are ideas that the City is thinking about. The only firm plan is to privatize solid waste collection. What will happen to the informal Collectors is not clear. It is unlikely that all current Collectors could be hired by a private City sanitation service.

Authors' viewpoint

The primary objective of improving the lives and work of Roma waste Collectors should be to end the cycle of chronic poverty among them, not simply to incorporate them into the existing waste management system or to outlaw their practices altogether. On the other hand, Collectors do have many skills, and indeed are proud of their knowledge and skills, and the City could put such knowledge and skills to good use within a program to generally uplift the economic and social status of Collectors.



7. IMPROVING COLLECTORS' LIVES

The opinions of Collectors and City officials for improving Collectors' lives, including their settlements, are not far apart. With so much common ground, clearly some very good solutions can be found and implementation could start.

We estimate that approximately 9,000-16,000 people in the City of Belgrade, mostly Roma, who live in chronic poverty, today *survive* on the collection of useful items from solid waste for re-sale and for some of their food, but not all of these people are Collectors. Included in this number are infants and small children, disabled people and the elderly who are supported by Collectors. If our estimate is correct, then this means that the number of people who could be helped *out of scavenging* is very manageable. *Assisting the children involved in scavenging, who might number between 5,000 and 8,000, to become educated and prepared for a different livelihood is also quite achievable.*

Not all Roma are Collectors nor do all Roma live in informal illegal settlements. The proportion of Roma who live in illegal settlements may be about 50% of all Roma residents of Belgrade*. It seems apparent that the remainder of Roma in Belgrade has integrated into the majority population, do not live isolated, and hold regular jobs or are successfully self-employed. The Collectors and other poor Roma are the last of this National Minority that need to be successfully integrated into the wider society.

Scavenging is primarily a 'family business', in that all members of the family participate: husbands, wives and children. Together a family can earn 12,000 or more dinars per month, on average more than the income of a single employee working for the City. However, most Collectors would prefer a steady job and might accept a somewhat lower pay in return for some job security, benefits, safer working conditions, dignity and freedom from harassment.

The City of Belgrade needs to consider the potential consequences of privatization on the lives of thousands of nearly destitute people who now survive from scavenging. When the City of Belgrade sells its solid waste collection services to a private company, and if it prohibits informal Collectors from taking items from solid waste containers and the City dump, many of these people will lose their main source or only source of income. This is because *it is unlikely that a new solid waste service or the City of Belgrade can employ all of the people who are now picking solid waste*. Some who will be prohibited from picking solid waste may still be able to receive food from market vendors for cleaning stalls and from C Market and other groceries in return for small chores, but this will not sustain them. Another group may continue cleaning out cellars and doing other odd jobs having to do with discarded items.

* These are our estimates based on the 2002 survey of all illegal Roma settlements of Belgrade, compared with a 1991 census of the City by ethnic group.



However, the great majority, who depend upon scavenging as their main source of livelihood and survival, may be thrown into greater destitution. This may create a humanitarian crisis involving many thousands of people in the City of Belgrade, especially the ‘newcomers’. *At least half of these people at risk will be children under the age of 15.* Former Collectors may be compelled to beg or even steal to feed their families, unless the City of Belgrade and other government authorities immediately set up some kind of social safety net for these families.

The City of Belgrade is currently giving considerable thought as to how to improve the living conditions of poor people, mostly Roma, who live in the 152 illegal and unhygienic settlements around Belgrade. The City is also considering various options for improving solid waste recycling and finding a continuing role for the waste Collectors. It is important for government authorities recognize the position of Collectors in society and to protect them from a catastrophe if informal scavenging is banned. Immediate action is required, before the solid waste collection services are privatized.

In this era of ecological consciousness, most European cities are now moving toward recycling of all solid wastes. To enter the European Union, the City of Belgrade should be thinking in the same direction. There already exists a workforce for this important work – Belgrade’s indigenous waste Collectors – who would welcome well paid jobs in a well-organized, clean, and safe environment.

As an alternative to employing these people, the City of Belgrade could support an improved private system of solid waste collection that would help Collectors achieve a more decent quality of life. Like the Collectors themselves say, garbage containers could be changed to encourage separation at the source. The citizens of Belgrade already show a tendency to separate out good items and edible food and to set them outside the bins, ready for taking. With a little additional public education and encouragement, it is likely that the people of Belgrade will for the most part comply with a new system of garbage separation.

Improvements to support an improved private system of solid waste collection and recycling could include:

- *Legalizing* Collectors’ activities, giving Collectors permits, selling them official uniforms and other protective clothing, and making it illegal to abuse Collectors either physically or verbally.
- Setting up a *system of solid waste separation* into categories such as cardboard, office paper, clothing, shoes and bags, bottles and glass, plastic, food and so forth, to keep these items clean and to make it easier and safer for Collectors to take these items, rather than having to search through mixed solid waste to find desirable items.



7. IMPROVING COLLECTORS' LIVES

- Assisting Collectors to set up *recycling stations* in their own communities that are fenced and locked and have cover from rain. This will keep their communities cleaner and will protect especially cardboard and office paper from being spoiled by rain. The City could collect recyclables from these community recycling stations.
- Providing *loans to Collectors* to improve their means of transportation. Transportation is the single most important factor in their earning ability. Loans for improved vehicles could be repaid quickly from the increased income.

In addition the City could reach out more to *children* who are Collectors to attend school. The Ministry of Education should consider allowing and encouraging such children to attend school without registration papers and should, at the same time, assist their parents in obtaining all required legal documents. The City should provide school books and school materials free of charge to poor families to encourage school attendance. Children should be protected from abuse by other children and teachers. This will help break the cycle of poverty faster than any other single action.

The City could also reach out to *women Collectors* to help them empower their lives. Currently they live under a system of patriarchy, which gives them little decision-making power within the family. Such women should have easier access to family planning and basic education.

Assisting Collectors to have better working conditions is one side of the coin. The other side concerns the conditions in their settlements. Wherever possible, it would be best to legalize existing Roma settlements and assist them in obtaining electricity, water supply, sanitation, domestic solid waste collection, schools, and essential social services. We recognize that some settlements clearly cannot be improved, primarily because of various difficulties with their locations. The City might consider giving such settlements new locations near the old ones and providing the minimum of infrastructure, such as roads, water supply and sewerage, telephone lines, and electrical lines. They might also be provided loans to build better structures than they can now afford.

Social housing, which is now planned for a number of families, is a lofty goal, but not all poor people will be eligible for these houses or apartments. Furthermore, such social apartment buildings will also need schools and programs for employment. Otherwise these apartment buildings will become again a scavenger community with sorted garbage and poverty. One can expect many new migrants of poor people from the south of Serbia into Belgrade over the coming years who will be seeking any means of income, unless, of course, the economic situation of the country makes a dramatic turnaround. The City would do well to plan for more very poor migrants by setting up basic infrastructure for such communities and allowing people to settle on these sites for a minimum rent or sale price. At least then the City can keep such sites hygienic and provide fire and ambulance services, even if the residents are poor. It



A PAPER LIFE

is usually not necessary to provide new housing for Roma. They are capable of providing it for themselves. What they need is legal tenure to the land they occupy and support from the City to improve their settlements.

This study was a first step toward developing a two-way dialogue between Collectors and City officials. Through a continuation of this dialogue, the City could create something positive both for City garbage collection and recycling and for the Collectors who need this work. The way to help Collectors improve their lives will require interdisciplinary action. We suggest that the City of Belgrade set up an interdisciplinary committee involving urban planners, ecologists, sociologists, educators, and representatives of Roma organizations and other non-governmental organizations to address this issue of the poor quality lives of Collectors.

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If you would like to contribute to the work of improving the lives of Roma in chronic poverty in Serbia and elsewhere in Europe, please contact:

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