



Inclusion of waste pickers recyclers in the Zero Waste Street Markets model

Prevention and management of organic waste in Santiago de Chile

Summary

Street markets (“ferias libres”) are critical for the supply of fresh food, but they produce large volumes of organic waste—including produce suitable for consumption—leading to both social and environmental losses. Fundación Basura implements the “**Zero Waste Street Markets**” model, which recovers produce suitable for consumption for vulnerable communities and valorizes waste through composting or animal feed. **By including waste pickers, Fundación Basura contributes to the empowerment and destigmatization of their role in society.** Scaling the model requires stable financing, infrastructure, an appropriate regulatory framework and practical tools for replication nationwide.



Context

- In Chile, street markets are traditional markets that operate on certain days of the week on neighbourhood streets and in cities. **There are 1,336 markets operating nationwide¹.**
- Their social and economic relevance are undeniable: **they ensure access to healthy, fresh and affordable food and generate employment**—women lead more than half of the businesses (Sercotec, 2016).
- However, they face a critical environmental and social challenge: **the 425 markets in the Metropolitan Region alone generate an estimated over 70,000 tons of organic waste annually, a significant portion of which is still suitable for consumption²**, de los cuales una parte importante corresponde a alimentos aún aptos para el consumo.
- This not only represents a waste of water, energy and soil resources invested in the production process; it is also a social loss in a country where **19% of the population lives in moderate or severe food insecurity** (FAO et al., 2023).

1 According to data from the national street market locator of the Oficina de Estudios de Políticas Agrarias (Odepa): <https://www.odepa.gob.cl/precios/consumidor/localizador-ferias-libres>

2 According to the Asociación Nacional de Organizaciones de Ferias Libres, Persas y Afines - ASOF (2015).

Zero Waste open-air markets

Fundación Basura has been preventing food waste in street markets since 2021 by actively recovering second-selection fruits and vegetables and redistributing them to community organisations that prepare meals for people facing food insecurity. Through this program, we also collect organic waste to compost or transform into animal feed.

To date, 35 interventions have been conducted in 11 municipalities in the Metropolitan and Valparaíso regions, responsibly managing 30 tonnes of organic materials: 73% (22 tons) was organic waste valorized, while 27% (8 tons) comprised fruits and vegetables still suitable for human consumption. These initiatives have benefited over 25,000 people and prevented the emission of 18 tons of CO₂ and 3 tons of CH₄³. These results show that street markets are strategic spaces for integrating circular solutions with positive environmental, social and economic impacts.

Inclusion of waste pickers

One notable milestone was the implementation of a pilot project in Santiago, made possible by a contribution from the UMI Fund. During this project, we trained waste pickers in the prevention and management of organic waste. They took part collecting, sorting, and transporting recovered produce. Further, they became key agents in raising awareness among vendors and strengthening on-site logistics. Their inclusion not only broadens historically precarious employment opportunities but also dignifies their role in the transition to a circular model of organic waste prevention and recovery in open-air markets.

In two days of work, 3,365 kilograms of waste were recovered in two-hour collection sessions: 7% (217 kg) comprised food donated to the soup kitchen⁴ La Ollita, which serves 180 people per week, while 93% (3,148 kg) was sent for composting at the Municipal Environmental Education Centre in Parque O'Higgins. The full experience—including a guide for waste pickers or other organisations to implement their own pilots—is available in the original document.

³ Eco-equivalences calculated with the support of the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)

⁴ Soup kitchens are community-based initiatives in which a group of people gathers to cook and distribute food collectively, especially in contexts of economic, political, or social crisis

Benefits



Environmental: Reduces the disposal of organic matter in landfills and thus cuts greenhouse-gas emissions.



Economic: Lowers municipal costs associated with transport and final disposal, promotes green jobs and opens opportunities for the formalisation of waste pickers recyclers.



Social: Contributes to the food security of vulnerable communities, strengthens neighbourhood cohesion and improves relations among markets, residents and neighbours by reducing waste in public spaces.

Challenges and opportunities

In Santiago and nationwide there is a lack of municipal-scale infrastructure for organic waste recovery, and the absence of permanent funding makes continuity and scalability difficult. A transition is needed from the current linear model—in which waste ends up in landfills—to a circular model that prioritises the prevention, reduction, management and recovery of organic waste. Redirecting current transport and disposal costs towards this new approach is essential. Moreover, there is a lack of inclusion of waste pickers within regulatory frameworks governing organic waste management, which directly ignores their historical impact and knowledge in waste collection.

To consolidate and replicate this model at national level, it is necessary to guarantee stable public and private funding, strengthen regulations, and increase inclusion of waste pickers. Developing local composting infrastructure and fostering partnerships among municipalities, vendor associations, social organisations and community groups will also be key. This approach will facilitate large-scale replication of the model, ensuring measurable contributions to Chile's 2025 NDC climate targets, directly advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), and strengthening implementation of the National Organic Waste Strategy.

In summary, Zero Waste Street Markets demonstrate that environmental responsibility, social inclusion and the circular economy can be integrated at local level. The active inclusion of waste pickers ensures that the transition to a fairer and more efficient waste-management system also provides an opportunity for dignified work and community strengthening..

Consolidation of the Model



A new stage is approaching! Thanks to the sponsorship of Global Methane Hub, Fundación Basura will continue to document and analyze the “Zero Waste Street Markets” projects in order to inform future replication and scaling. A proposal will be developed for large-scale implementation, incorporating technical, operational and financial strategies. A financial-sustainability

model will be implemented and evaluated, and a set of practical tools (a tool kit) will be created—comprising implementation manuals, operational guides and documented lessons learned—to facilitate the replication of the model in municipalities across the country. The experience and its results will be shared at the 30th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30) and 31th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31).

References

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