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Women with No Time to Waste

Ho Chi Minh City's private waste collectors organize to improve lives and livelihoods



Photo: Mark Mason, US-AEP

“Two-thirds of the waste collectors are women and many are mothers, so health is very important to us,” says Trang Thu Nguyen. “I now wear gloves so that I touch the trash much less... Also, if one of us becomes sick, we have access to health funds and the hospital.”

Trang Thu Nguyen is an informal waste collector in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City. “I've been in this business for 13 years, and I was always concerned about the health risks to me and to my younger brother who helps me. But I didn't know enough about the germs and dangers to do anything about it.”

Trang used a rudimentary pushcart to collect the trash she picked up off the street, often with her bare hands. She had no access to health care, and when she got sick it was difficult to maintain her already meager income. Almost two-thirds of waste collectors in Trang's district are women. Their wages are low — \$100–\$150 a month — and few have written contracts. Collecting fees from residents is difficult, and conflicts with other waste collectors over routes are common.

In 2003, USAID helped launch a project to boost the efficiency of solid waste management and improve the working conditions of Ho Chi Minh City's informal waste collectors. Collection routes were mapped and rearranged, improving the city's waste collection services and reducing conflicts among collectors. And support from city authorities helped waste collectors establish written contracts with households and formalize the fee collection process.

To boost waste collectors' standard of living, a local group worked with the Department of Natural Resources and Environment to organize the collectors into a syndicate, which now has 180 members in five city districts. Members of the syndicate were given safety training, tetanus immunizations, physical exams and health cards for state hospitals. They also attended financial planning sessions that helped them set up a health and savings fund that syndicate members contribute to monthly. Syndicate members' old metal and wood collection carts were replaced with light, durable plastic carts that don't leak and can be automatically hoisted at the local transfer station. Collectors also received uniforms and protective gear, including gloves, a cap, a mask and plastic boots.

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