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## Johnson & Johnson's Project Phoenix Helps Brazilian Garbage Scavengers Rise from the Ashes

Words by Jen Boynton

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[Johnson & Johnson's Project Phoenix](#) started with a desire to get more post-consumer recycled waste into Band-Aid boxes. The boxes in question are manufactured in Brazil, and the personal care product company was looking for a local supply of used paper to convert into box material. In Brazil, recycling happens not at the hands of a municipal recycling agency, but at the hands of scavengers called "catadores." The World Bank estimates that 1-2 percent of urban populations makes their living through scavenging. [Catadores](#) have the dangerous and thankless job of picking through landfill refuse to find useful materials that might be resold.

Brazilian catadores have things a bit easier than scavengers in other countries because the government mandates that catadores organize themselves into co-ops, which provide a bit of additional structure and security for this vulnerable population. There are currently around 500 co-ops in Brazil employing around 60,000 pickers. This infrastructure is fairly unique and provided Johnson & Johnson a prime opportunity to help one co-op formalize its approach and thereby raise the standard of living for all its members, while providing a ready supply of used paper for their supply chain.

Paulette Frank, VP of Sustainability at Johnson & Johnson spoke from the heart about this initiative at [Sustainable Brands 2013](#). As she tells it, the fact that recycling happened through a series of co-ops presented a challenge and an opportunity for Johnson & Johnson. On the one hand, things were a bit more complicated than just contracting with the local municipality to get nice and neat stacks of paper to input into their box manufacturing process. On the other hand, by engaging with a co-op, J&J had the opportunity to engage with some of the most at-risk and vulnerable populations in the world and help them improve their lots in life. What started as a desire for a reliable source of used paper turned into a mission to seed the creation of a true social enterprise.

Johnson & Johnson decided to work with the [Futura Cooperative](#) on the PCW paper project. But the co-op, while a lot more organized than a bunch of individuals picking the landfills on their own, was not quite functioning highly enough to provide a reliable stream of waste paper to meet Johnson & Johnson's demand. According to Frank, the international fair labor standard [SA8000](#) "provided a roadmap for getting the co-op where they needed to be." It helped the group move from being an average co-op to a high performing one that could provide high quality product utilizing fair labor practices to protect the workers. The process of going through a certification was quite foreign for Futura, but they were motivated by the opportunity a big client like Johnson & Johnson, as well as the chance to formalize and improve the working conditions for their members.

Said Frank, "Before getting involved with this process, I considered myself to be a little skeptical about the benefit of certifications. But when I met the people at Futura, it was undeniable how important the certification is for their well-being and pride. When you visit, they take you to the wall to show you the displayed certification. They touch it and explain what it means to them. It has made a huge difference in their lives. In addition to the pride it gives these workers in their jobs, it matters to the municipality there too. The city gives Futura more business because they are trustworthy." Futura can also bring the certification to the bank and demonstrate the health of their business practices, which makes it easier to get loans to expand the business.

Today Futura is a true sustainable business. The company has seen a 50 percent increase in productivity since obtaining the certification. They are processing more waste, improving the environment by reducing the volume of landfills and they are employing at-risk members of society and giving them meaningful work - lives are unquestionably better thanks to the certification. Futura now has a waiting list of people who want to work for them.

For Johnson & Johnson, this isn't a simply a CSR initiative. The company now has a reliable, high-quality source of post-consumer recycled paper. Frank put it best, "We're transitioning from benefactor to customer."

As for the Futura coop members, they are no longer simply scavengers - the lowest type of employment. Instead, they are citizens doing valuable work for the community and the planet. Said Frank, "They used to feel like dogs, but now see that they are valuable members of society doing necessary work."



**JEN BOYNTON**

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