

# Overview of the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Inclusive Recycling in Brazil

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*Partnerships with cooperatives such as COMARP in Belo Horizonte, Brazil (pictured here before the COVID-19 crisis) can ensure access to emergency food security measures.*  
Photo by Julian Luckham

**B**razil experienced a period of great innovation in the solid waste management sector. This innovation relates to the implementation of inclusive public policies, encompassing the start of inclusive separation at source collection in the 1990s in cities including Porto Alegre, Sao Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Diadema, and the first municipal programmes on joint segregated waste collection involving associations and cooperatives of waste pickers. The waste-collecting labour of these workers, historically informal, evolved into formal relations with public authorities, first through agreements and then through service provision contracts.

From 1998 to 2010, public policies at local, state and national level were greatly influenced by the principles of the *Fórum Nacional Lixo e Cidadania* (National Forum Waste and Citizenship or FNLC) and segregated waste-collection programmes expanded to other cities. Public policies to promote and support waste pickers were also implemented. During that period, the *Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis* (National Movement of Pickers of Recyclables or MNCR) was created – in 2001 – and consolidated as the main entity representing waste pickers.

Working on their own (mostly connected by scrap dealers) or organized through associations and cooperatives, the waste pickers of recyclable materials are described as those who “collect, select and sell recyclable materials such as paper, cardboard, glass, as well as iron-made and

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non-iron-made materials and other re-usable materials” (MTE/CBO). In 2002, the Brazilian National Classification of Occupations (CBO) recognized waste collecting as an occupation and noted it as such in the national registry. In that registry, waste collecting can be identified in the public databases that provide access to the history of findings and analysis of the phenomenon of waste collecting in Brazil. This provides a richness in data that was impossible a few decades ago, however some analysts point out the need to refine the available data.

The Census of 2010 indicated that there were between 400,000 and 600,000 waste pickers in Brazil, of which around 30,300 were organized in 1,175 cooperatives or associations (IPEA, 2012). The MNCR indicated, also in 2010, that there were about 800,000 waste pickers in the country. However, it must be noted that the research that informed the public databases and PNAD (national household sample survey) did not include waste pickers living in open dumps or in the streets due to their homelessness.

As Dias (2011) points out, the relevance of waste pickers (organized or autonomous), no matter their size, is mainly due to their role as essential workers in the Brazilian recycling chain, especially because there is still a limited number of municipal programmes of segregated waste collection in the country.

Recycling of solid waste represents an opportunity for cities to reach their strategic goals of sustainability, environmental protection, inclusive productivity and participatory governance. Therefore, the notion of inclusive recycling has guided the implementation of municipal programmes of segregated waste collection, promoting the inclusion of associations and cooperatives of waste pickers. Such programmes are referred to here as inclusive recycling. An ongoing demand by Brazilian waste pickers is the recognition of their work and contribution as relevant actors in the municipal recycling systems and their role in the recycling value chain on a national level.

The growing number of workers involved in waste collection – many of them unemployed people who view the activity as a survival strategy, especially in times of crisis – leads to the need for research and studies that allow for increased

knowledge of workers’ roles in the recycling chain. More research is needed on how economic and health crises affect municipal recycling systems, given the crucial role these play in the livelihoods of waste pickers and their families. The capacity of urban solid waste systems to generate decent work is crucial in the context of growing urban populations and economic and health crises, such as that of COVID-19.

Immediately after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020, WIEGO took action and started to develop several responses. From the beginning of the global health crisis, WIEGO started monitoring and documenting the impact of the virus on the world’s 2 billion informal workers, including waste pickers, street traders and domestic workers. Rapid mapping appraisals, technical notes and informative posters were developed, both for technical communities and for waste-picker groups. Multilateral agencies were also targeted to advocate for basic income, food security measures, access to protection equipment, etc. In this way, WIEGO has acted in support of grassroots organizations at local, national and global levels since the pandemic took hold.

In March, WIEGO’s Brazil Team began a process of news monitoring of the impact of the pandemic on the segregated waste collection systems in cities and in cooperatives and waste pickers’ associations. It also monitored emergency measures implemented by governments and other actors.

At the same time, ABIPHEC – the *Associação Brasileira da Indústria de Higiene Pessoal, Perfumaria e Cosméticos* (Brazilian Association of Cosmetics, Toiletry and Fragrance Industry) – began its survey on the operations of cooperatives in the context of its *Program Dê a Mão para o Futuro* (DAMF). The survey then became the basis for designing public policies for emergency support targeting the 150 participating cooperatives.

News monitoring and analysis done by WIEGO and the data collected and compiled by ABIPHEC are considered to be roadmaps tracing this overview for inclusive recycling in Brazil. Well aware of the importance of a baseline for the impacts of COVID-19, the authors of this study cross-checked information considering the segregated waste collection system and the socioeconomic

impacts for cooperatives and in the lives of waste pickers. The authors further complemented this research with a survey on the health and general conditions of waste pickers.

The current pandemic presents particular challenges for the solid-waste sector in general, whether formal or informal, and for the sector of popular recycling (cooperatives). The challenges faced by waste pickers are aggravated by the vulnerability of that sector due to unsanitary work environments (whether at open dumps, in the streets without protection, or at improvised sorting sheds), the lack of access to and/or inadequate capacity for using individual protection equipment, among other factors. The pandemic adds an extra layer of vulnerability to waste pickers' already precarious work. Monitoring impacts and trends in different levels of responses is important to link the immediate demands of waste pickers in this context with the design of interventions for emergency support. This should include an evaluation of post-COVID-19 recovery activities.

The structure of this report is based on two independent but interrelated components. The **first part** presents an overview of the main trends in municipal systems of segregated waste collection and support measures to autonomous

waste pickers and waste picker members of cooperatives, through WIEGO News Tracking.

The **second part** presents an analysis of the overview proposed, based on data and information gathered through surveys of the cooperatives and associations of waste pickers of recyclable materials that participate in the DAMF during the COVID-19 pandemic. We defined three themes for this overview:

- 1) The functioning of the cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19;
- 2) The impact on the trade of recyclable materials from the perspective of cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19; and
- 3) The health situation of waste pickers during COVID-19.

The analysis undertaken in the first two points was based on the compilation of graphics centred on the DAMF monitoring survey. The third was based on data collected by the authors of this study by surveying the same cooperatives and associations of waste pickers.

Lastly, we present in the concluding remarks some recommendations based on emergency support actions and the post-COVID-19 scenario.

## Part 1: Overview of Trends (Tracking System) – Urban Systems of Segregated Waste Collection

The starting point of this news tracking was an initial news compilation by WIEGO's Brazil Team. This compilation started when the pandemic began, with the goal of identifying the changes in segregated collection systems, as well as the impacts on the lives and work of waste pickers. It also mapped the measures of social protection targeting workers.

The starting point was, therefore, a pre-existing system of Google Alerts<sup>1</sup> along with tracking news shared in WhatsApp groups (news items shared by specialists and waste pickers) and newsletters (Web-Resol). From this information, we created an Excel spreadsheet with thematic axes related to social protection and data about the impact

on segregated collection systems in relation to waste pickers (autonomous and members of cooperatives).

While this was not an exhaustive review, we examined around 130 news items from newspapers, radio, Facebook groups and pages of waste-picker cooperatives, and YouTube. We selected, according to content criteria, 86 key news items which were added to a second Excel sheet tracking system, organized by regions and cities.

The mapping was done between March 15 and May 15, which was the period in which COVID-19 cases started to be registered in major cities.

<sup>1</sup> Keywords: *catadores* (waste pickers), *catadores de materiais recicláveis* (waste pickers of recyclable materials), *catadores de lixo* (trash waste pickers), *carroceiros* (carters).



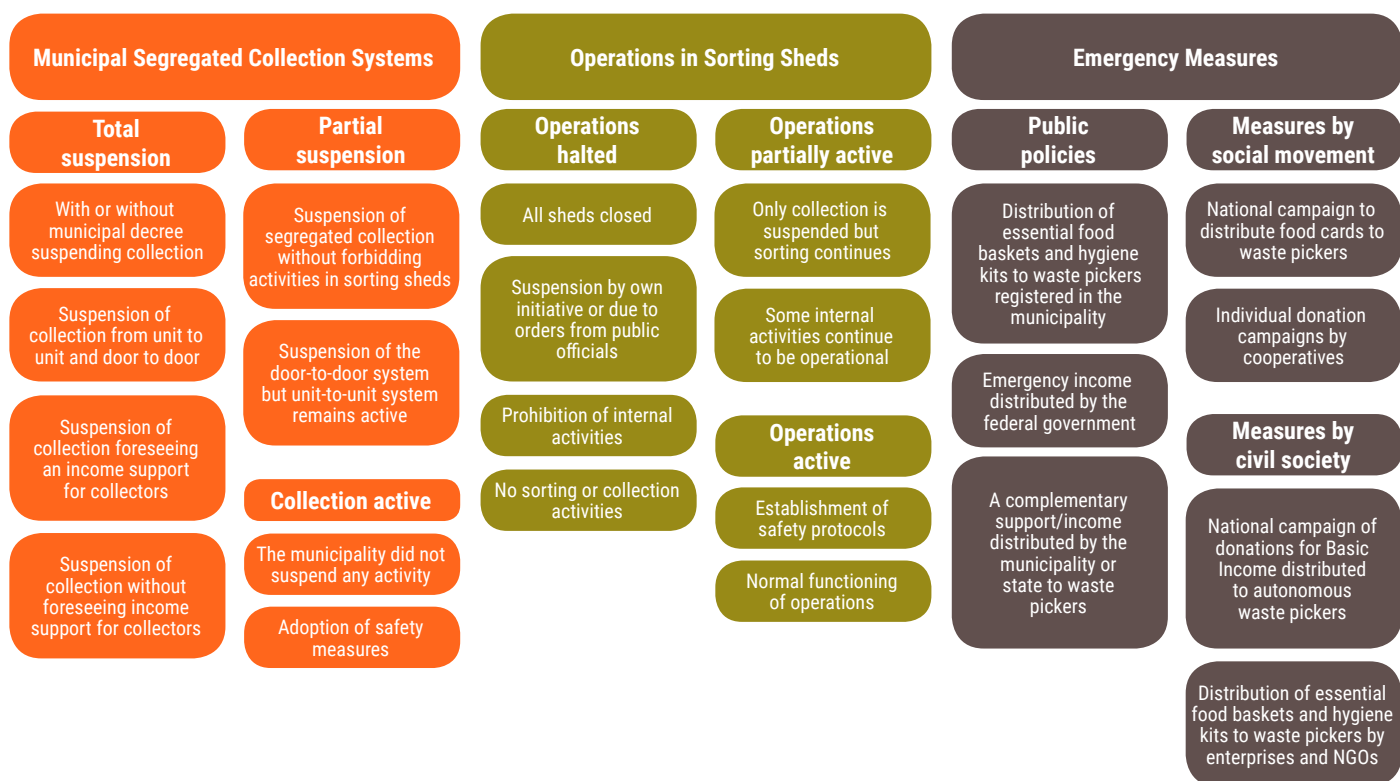
It was also during this period that local and federal governments started to implement the first measures related to the crisis and created committees to tackle it. Likewise, from March 15 to May 15, urban cleaning institutions, cooperatives and their networks, as well as sanitation-sector enterprises, started taking the first measures of risk prevention and making decisions about whether to continue or suspend segregated waste collection activities.

**Figure 1** summarizes the main trends found in segregated waste collection and in their relation with waste pickers.

In the initial phase of COVID-19, the main trends identified in the news tracking include the full suspension of segregated waste collection systems, and partial suspension and maintenance of segregated waste collection.

Regarding the functioning of sorting sheds in cooperatives of waste pickers, the shutdown of operations was the main trend, but other approaches, such as the partial suspension of collection (or introduction of containers for reception of recyclable materials) or continuing operations by introducing safety protocols can also be seen. Strategies to mitigate the economic crisis, such as food-security-related policies through donations of essential food baskets to families of affected workers and, in some municipalities, the approval of basic income programmes were also adopted. More advanced measures included the design of coordination strategies to better respond to the crisis, such as social protection policies and mid-term strategies to reduce harm to affected workers.

**Figure 1: COVID-19 trends in inclusive recycling**



# Part 2: COVID-19 Situation of Cooperatives of Recyclable-Material Waste Pickers in Brazil

## Methodology

The database of cooperatives of waste pickers of recyclable materials presented in this research was obtained through the DAMF, which includes more than 150 cooperatives. This programme is a System of Extended Producer Responsibility that prioritizes the participation of cooperatives of waste pickers as an essential link in the supply chain, responsible for collecting, receiving, screening, valuing and trading recyclable materials, thus ensuring these materials are used for their intended purpose in the recycling industry.

The three questionnaires created in the Google Forms platform concerned:

- 1) The functioning of cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19;
- 2) The value of recyclable materials from the perspective of cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19; and
- 3) The health situation of waste pickers during COVID-19.

It is important to note that the object of this analysis was cooperatives of recyclable-material waste pickers and not the individual members of these cooperatives.

Therefore, the results that present personal information regarding, for example, the number of cases of waste pickers infected with COVID-19

and cases of domestic violence, are based on statements by the heads of the cooperatives. These results are not based on individual consultations with members of the cooperatives. It also means that other cases might have occurred without the knowledge of heads of cooperatives – particularly in situations where the cooperatives had suspended operations due to municipal edicts regarding staying at home and suspension of non-essential activities.

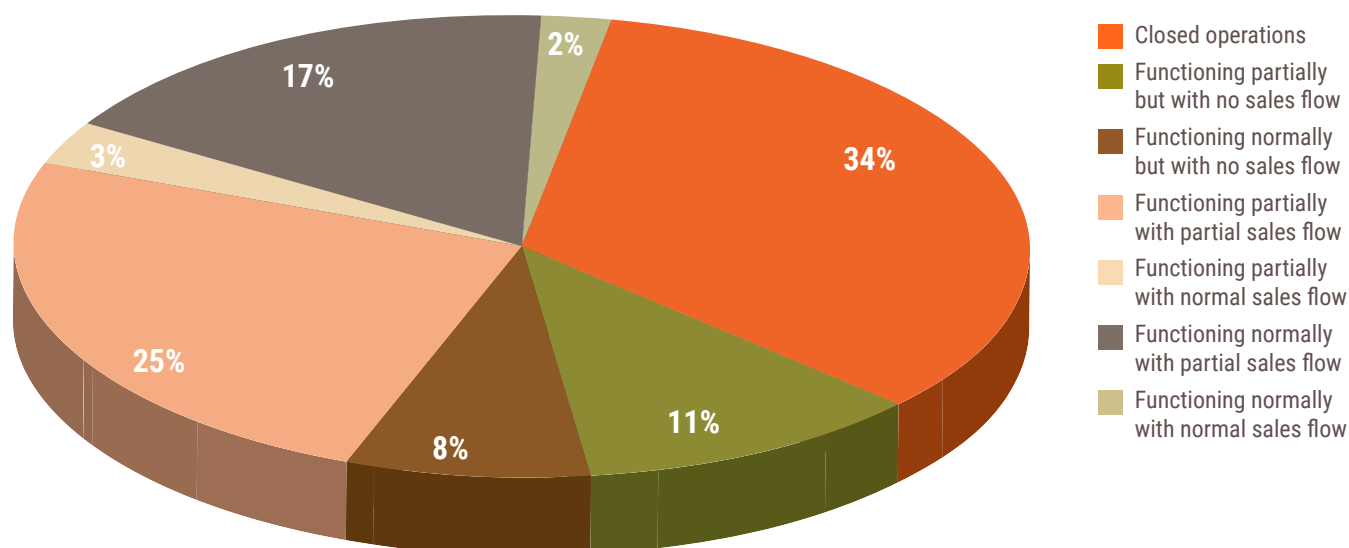
## Data description and analysis

Data collection started with the first reports of temporary suspension of segregated collection and full suspension of operations of a few cooperatives in the second half of March. With the municipal and state edicts calling on people to stay at home and stopping non-essential services, collection of recyclable waste and manual sorting were suspended in several Brazilian municipalities.

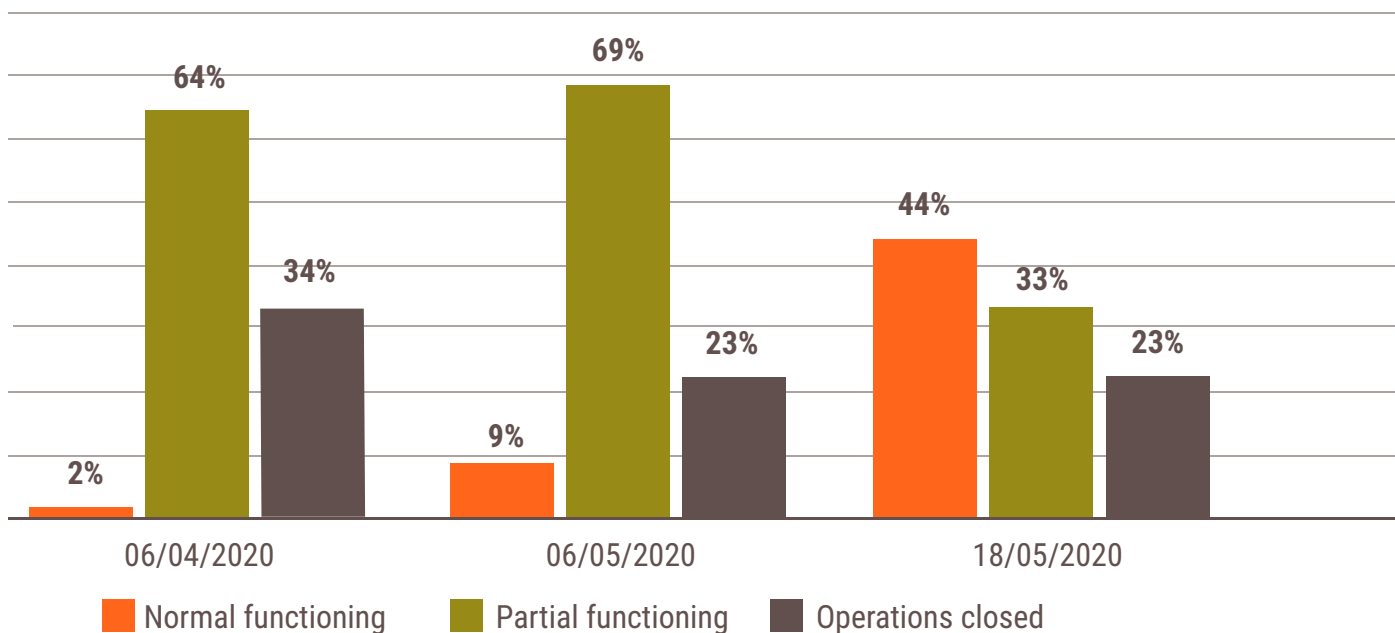
### Functioning of cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19

The first survey was conducted between March 30 and April 4, 2020 with a sample of 140 participating cooperatives. It showed that 34 per cent had their operations fully suspended, 64 per cent were partially suspended and only 2 per cent were operating normally. **Figure 2** shows the different categorizations related to partial suspensions.

Figure 2: Operation of cooperatives that participated in DAMF



**Figure 3: Functioning of cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19**



In **Figure 3**, we can follow the evolution on the functioning status of cooperatives in three different periods from the beginning of social distancing and quarantine measures.

The cooperatives functioning normally evolved from 2 per cent of the total at the beginning of the monitoring to 44 per cent. However, cooperatives that fully suspended operations, which started at 34 per cent of the total, stabilized at 23 per cent in the two following surveys. We conclude, therefore, that most cooperatives that evolved to normalizing their operations originated mostly from the groups of cooperatives that were partially functioning, which fell from 69 per cent to 33 per cent during this period.

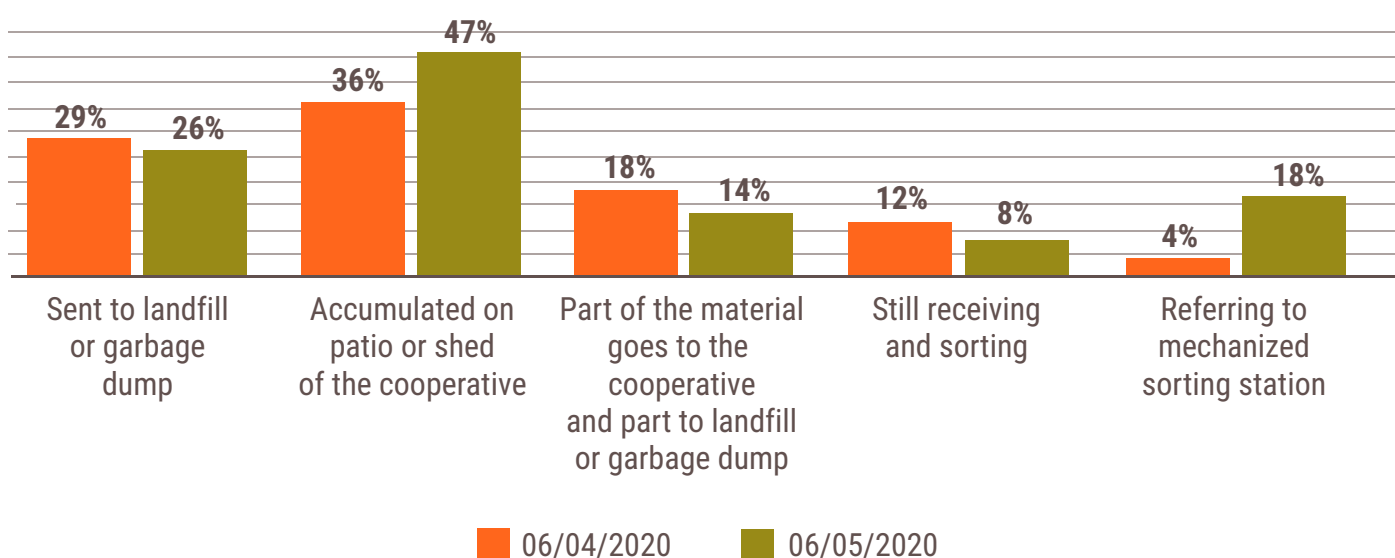
With the suspensions of segregated collection services, it became urgent to identify the

destination of recyclable materials that were no longer being collected. In the municipalities in which collection was not suspended, but where the cooperatives had to temporarily shut down their operations, there was the same problem regarding the destination of materials.

In the survey targeting heads of cooperatives or consultants who provide technical support to cooperatives, there was a question regarding the destination of recyclable materials for the cooperatives that had their functioning partially or fully suspended. The following data (**Figure 4**) was obtained.

There are two key findings in Figure 4. The first relates to the increase in the number of cooperatives using the strategy of accumulating material in the patio or inside the sorting shed,

**Figure 4: Destinations of materials in cases of cooperatives closed or partially functioning**



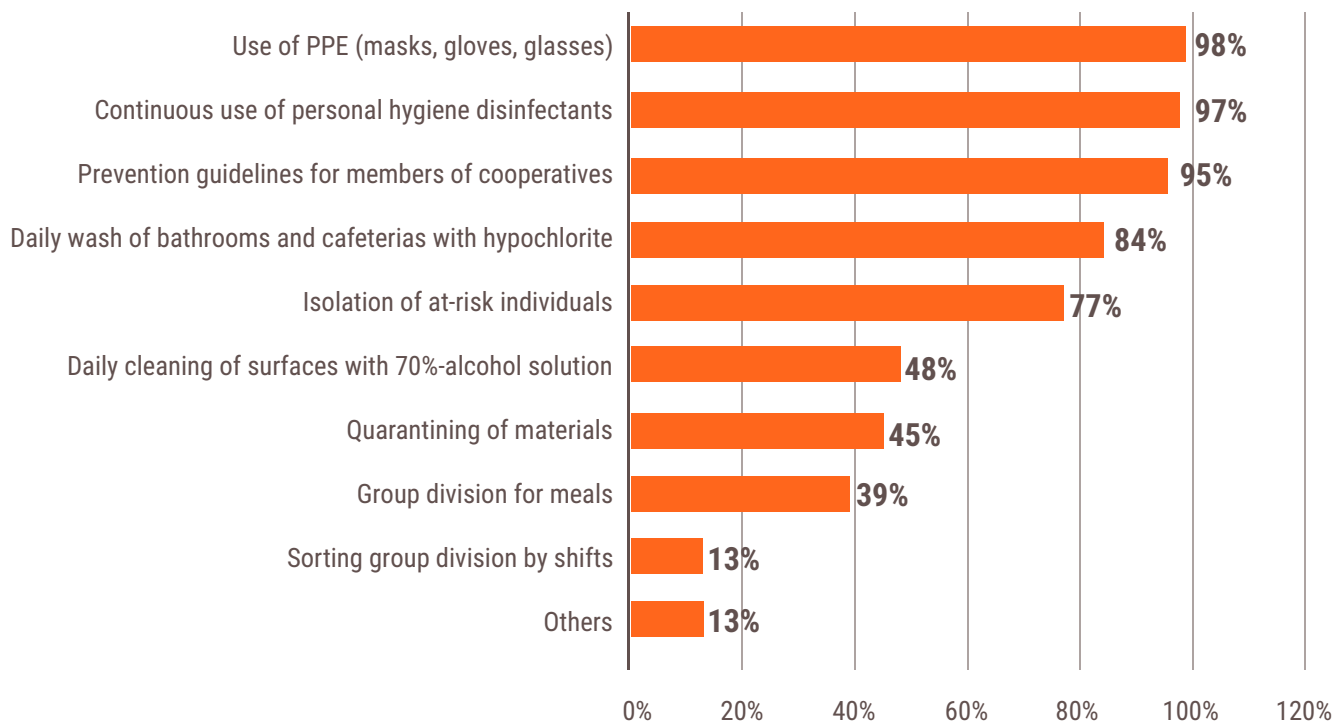
which rose from 36 per cent to 47 per cent between the two surveys. This data may mean that processes to quarantine the material before sorting it may have intensified. The second key finding relates to the cooperatives that suspended activities – they were still receiving recyclable materials to sort and to trade later.

### Prevention protocols and mapping of cases of waste pickers infected with COVID-19

In the third survey, regarding the health of waste pickers and prevention strategies within the sorting warehouses, it was possible to systematize the prevention protocols adopted in the cooperatives.

These protocols include personal hygiene and work environment practices, protection practices

**Figure 5: Contagion prevention protocols**



We must, however, note the low rate of cooperatives that are quarantining materials. With the normal cycle of reception for sorting materials, the risk of infection rises, because the virus can live 24 to 72 hours on the surfaces of discarded packaging (ABES, March 2020).

As a result of these prevention protocols, by the end of the last survey (March 18, 2020), there was a low number of suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 among waste pickers.

The final results totalled 50 suspected cases, only one confirmed case and no registered deaths,

such as the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and social distancing practices including separating workers from at-risk groups and dividing workers in groups during meals. These and other measures are shown in **Figure 5**.

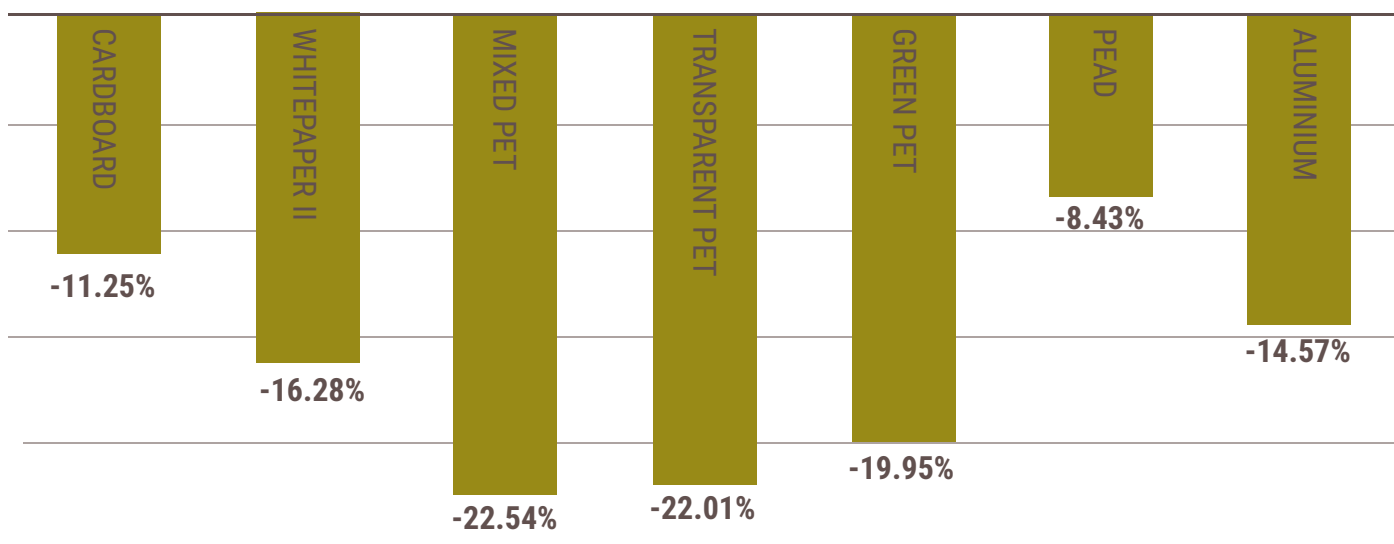
We highlight the almost universal adoption by cooperatives of the first three essential measures: using PPEs, disinfection and personal hygiene, and providing prevention guidelines to members of cooperatives. Another two protocols that are widely implemented are: cleaning cafeterias and bathrooms with hypochlorite and isolating at-risk groups, such as people aged 60 or over and those with comorbidities including diabetes, chronic pulmonary disease and immunodeficiency (more than 75 per cent of cooperatives).

according to statements by the cooperatives representing 4,291 waste pickers. Therefore, the cases registered represented only 1 per cent of this population. It is also important to note that – regarding the suspected and confirmed cases that cooperatives were aware of – only four

**Figure 6: COVID-19 cases**



Figure 7: Comparing decreased percentiles in market value per type of material



waste pickers had access to testing and health care services proved by the National Health System (SUS), Brazil's national, free and universal health care system.<sup>2</sup>

For the cooperatives that partially maintained their operations or continued to operate normally, the main challenge was the low market value of materials. Some cooperatives said there were no buyers interested in some of their materials, due to the fall in commodities and consumer spending. A survey was undertaken concerning materials still marketable. The decline in value per kg of each type of material is more than 20 per cent, as shown in **Figure 7**.

Considering the difficulties in keeping the cooperatives functioning, reducing or suspending collection, plus the decline in the market value of materials and even, in some cases, the suspension of demand, the cooperatives are in a critical situation – even more than they were in the 2008 economic crisis.

With the decline in the value of recyclable materials in the commodities market and reduced consumer spending, the cooperatives – due to their financial fragility – are held captive by low market prices because they need to sell materials at whatever price is offered (Souza, 2013). During the 2008 economic crisis, the low prices for materials resulted in waste pickers defecting

to other informal markets. Cooperatives experienced a significant decline in productivity and financial health and, consequently, reduced numbers of members.

In the current crisis, we must note that many of the required sanitary restrictions have stopped the normal functioning of factories, and there are also transit restrictions of trucks on roads if they are not carrying essential merchandise, as was the case in the state of Santa Catarina, which closed its borders. This not only led to low market prices for materials, but interrupted the selling of materials themselves, leading some cooperatives to have zero profits.

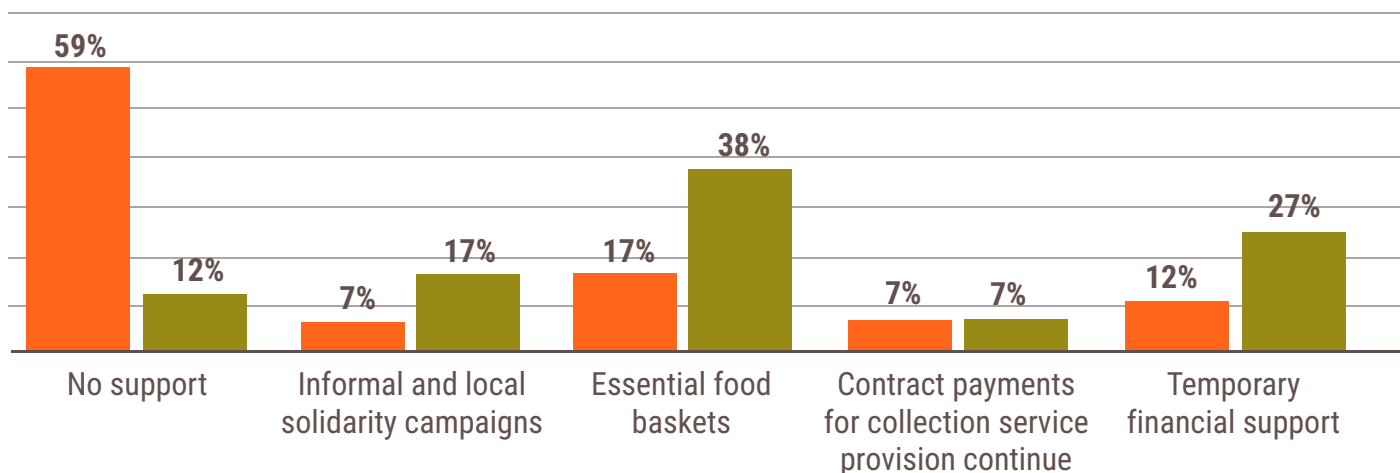
To cope with this situation, cooperatives and their supporters have begun mobilizing various support systems, such as those shown in **Figure 8**.

It is noteworthy that the number of cooperatives stating a total lack of support to their workers is significantly lower in the period covered in the second survey. If we consider the distribution of different support types from the first to the second period, we can see a significant increase in the donation of essential food baskets, which were raised by several campaigns. However, we must note that food baskets alone do not solve the financial problems of families who have to consider spending on rent, bills, medicine, etc.

<sup>2</sup> The SUS is the main institutional health structure in Brazil to guide service protocols during the COVID-19 outbreak because its network of assistance is extensive and far-reaching. According to the official protocol [PROTOCOLO DE MANEJO CLÍNICO DO CORONAVÍRUS (COVID-19) NA ATENÇÃO PRIMÁRIA À SAÚDE] anyone who shows symptoms should call SUS and be evaluated by a doctor and then referred appropriately. Only those who show, for example, breathing difficulties will be referred in-person. This measure was adopted to avoid gatherings of people in SUS units and prevent mass contagion. This protocol explains why testing is slow, but it does not necessarily indicate lack of assistance and proper guidance. Available at: <https://www.saude.gov.br/images/pdf/2020/marco/20/20200318-ProtocoloManejo-ver002.pdf>. Last access: 01/06/2020.



Figure 8: Types of support provided to collectors during COVID-19



Source: DAMF, 2020

06/04/2020

06/05/2020

Another item to highlight is the increase in the number of cooperatives that said their workers had access to temporary financial support. This growth relates to basic income support granted by municipalities, states and the federal government.

During the period of the third survey, regarding the health situation of waste pickers during the pandemic, cooperatives were asked how many waste pickers had access to the emergency support subsidy provided by the federal government to which all workers should be entitled. **From the 4,391 waste pickers, 2,531 (58 per cent) received this subsidy** (the survey was undertaken between May 12 and May 18, 2020).

The main reasons why waste pickers had difficulties accessing this subsidy was either an irregularity in the *Cadastro de Pessoa Física*<sup>3</sup> [or caused by an information error in registrations

due to, for example, accessibility issues in the Federal Economic Bank (*Caixa Econômica Federal*) applications. Other reasons hindering access to the subsidy were related to cases such as more than two people from the same household requesting it, lack of a bank account, difficulties in accessing a digital savings account required for the subsidy, and lack of a smartphone or internet access necessary for the process.

### Impact of domestic violence and mental suffering on waste pickers during the pandemic

Due to quarantine, social distancing, lack of work routines and financial and livelihood strains, other problems grew alarmingly. Cases of domestic violence was one key question asked of cooperatives and we can see the following scenario (**Figure 9**).

Figure 9: Information from cooperatives on domestic violence



<sup>3</sup> Translator's note: The *Cadastro de Pessoa Física* is a registry that provides each citizen with a personalized number, in addition to an ID or social security number. This enables access to people's records of debt, fiscal information, etc.

It is worth noting that the information was collected through the statements of heads of cooperatives and many may not have been aware of such cases. Even so, the framework of domestic violence experienced by women is significant, considering that **54 per cent of the 4,391 waste picker members of the cooperatives are women.**

Other key data also concerned difficulties in the domestic sphere and related to impacts on mental health identified by the cooperatives regarding their members. It is important to note that this identification is according to the perceptions of the heads of cooperatives. Therefore, to infer any rigorous analysis regarding mental disturbances caused by the pandemic, a more ample and profound analysis is required. However, the testimonies presented are alarming and underline the need for further research.

Forty per cent of the cooperatives that participated in this survey said they were aware of cases of mental suffering due to the effects of the pandemic. Stress and anxiety were mentioned most often. The cases of anxiety frequently related to a yearning to return to work, which is also linked to the reports regarding stress caused by financial difficulties. In the case of at-risk groups, self-isolation required during the pandemic, as well as uncertainties regarding wages during this isolation, caused anxiety.

The few studies published regarding mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic alert us to the fact that, in times like these, the number of people whose mental health is affected tends to be larger than the number of people infected by the virus. A mental pandemic becomes one of the collateral effects of a viral pandemic – “previous tragedies have shown that the implications for mental health may last longer and be more prevalent than the epidemic itself and that the psychosocial and economic impacts may be incalculable if we consider their repercussions in different contexts” (Ornell, 2020).

Fear of contagion, anxiety related to unpredictable conditions and insecurity regarding work situations, as well as stress induced by financial strains are, therefore, the correlations presented. Regarding the evolution of this mental suffering, which begins as real fear and moves on to anxiety and stress, Ornell writes: “Fear is an adaptable animal defense mechanism which is

fundamental for survival and it involves several biological preparation processes for a response to potentially threatening events. However, when it becomes chronic or disproportional, it is prejudicial and it may be an essential component in the development of several psychiatric disturbances. During a pandemic, fear raises the levels of anxiety and stress in healthy individuals and intensifies the symptoms in those individuals with pre-existent psychiatric conditions” (Ornell, 2020).

In one cooperative, three cases of panic syndrome were diagnosed more precisely among its members. Higher consumption of alcohol was also reported as were some suspected cases of acute depression among elderly members who were in self-isolation.

## Concluding remarks

The data presented and analyzed in the second part of this research, which encompasses the period from March to May 2020, indicates a rapid adaptation of cooperatives and associations of waste pickers of recyclable materials to the prevention protocols required to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic.

We can confirm this by observing that, in the beginning of this period, almost no cooperative was functioning normally, but by the second half of May 44 per cent had already returned to normal. The rapid adaptation to the protocols required could be the main factor related to the low incidence of COVID-19 among waste pickers who are members of the cooperatives analyzed. However, we must again note that there was no individual consultation with each collector, but instead a survey for heads of cooperatives.

We also see that the measures of adaptation required to function with the restrictions imposed during the pandemic do not soften the economic impacts suffered by these cooperatives, because these impacts are dependent on a variable of externalities, such as the commodities market and restrictions on the operations of buyers and recyclers during the pandemic.

In face of the difficulties presented, and considering the impacts regarding mental suffering and social conditions imposed by the fragile socioeconomic situation of these workers, a more extensive and detailed monitoring is needed. Occurrences of domestic violence, for example,

raise the need for a survey targeted at individual waste pickers, cross-checked with databases of police records during the pandemic. Likewise, to design a more exact scenario regarding mental suffering, descriptive evaluation tools and specific questionnaires on the topic are required. Still, the indicators presented by this study show that these two factors – mental suffering and fragile social conditions – were prevalent in these last few months and stress that more detailed studies are needed.

We consider the monitoring undertaken in this study as the snapshot of a crisis scenario in the inclusive recycling sector. This draft needs to be further developed, considering that we still do not know about the long lasting effects of COVID-19 on public health and the social and economic spheres.

The information collected by similar tracking systems must be compiled and become the basis for the design of public and private policies of support, ensuring that the impacts are minimized in this productive sector. These policies must guarantee the sector's survival and allow it to continue to leverage the indicators of national recycling by presenting a model of inclusive recycling with positive results of sustainability in the social, economic and environmental spheres.

## Policy recommendations

- Governments should ensure working conditions that allow waste pickers to practice social distancing in their workplaces and to adopt the recommended health measures;
- Basic income policies must be created in formats that can be easily implemented. Simple access to emergency measures of food security must also be ensured. Partnerships with organizations of waste pickers and/or NGOs that support them is a way to streamline the distribution of food;
- Information regarding the virus and practical guidelines of prevention must be quickly made available during epidemics, as well as access to water sources in workplaces and public stations, masks, soap, alcohol-based sanitizers, gloves, uniforms and boots.
- Waste pickers, whether autonomous or members of cooperatives, should have rapid

access to tests and treatment due to their heightened exposure to the virus, whether in sorting sheds or in the streets;

- Looking ahead, it is necessary to regard **segregated waste collection services as essential services**. Waste pickers must be categorized as essential workers to allow for improvements in equipment and collecting and sorting infrastructure, changes in service provision contracts between municipalities and cooperatives with the addition of contingency plans and special clauses to ensure contract payment during epidemics, investment in capacity-building related to work safety and investment in individual and collective protection equipment;
- Organizations of waste pickers and partner entities must embrace the cause of safe service provision by contributing to capacity-building of cooperative members and monitoring the adoption of safety protocols;
- It is also important to invest in building a registry of autonomous waste pickers to extend the coverage of services and access to public policies of assistance to waste pickers.

Finally, we remind ourselves that the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the intrinsic connection between health, economy and the environment, demanding a complex set of social protection, sanitation control, economic and psychosocial measures, among others.

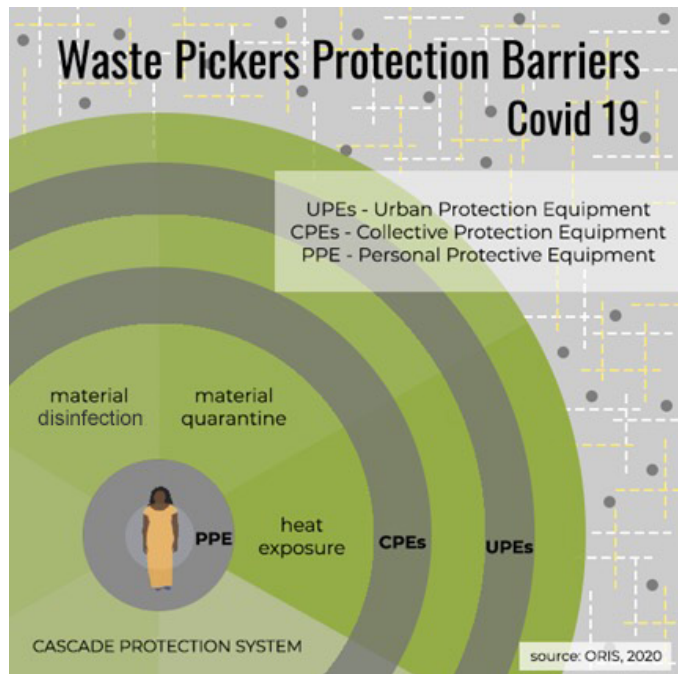
The Observatory of Inclusive Recycling<sup>4</sup> in its operational manual (ORIS, 2020:02) explains the relevance to design responses for the pandemic that go beyond the:

***health v economy dilemma**, between stopping production, prioritizing health, or continuing production, prioritizing the economy. Our position is that it is possible to produce safely. For that, segregated collection services and work processes in sorting sheds must be re-organized by adopting preventive measures, in order to avoid infections of the new coronavirus. Ensuring the safety of waste pickers, their family members and neighbours, as well as that of the general population, during collection or in the use of public transport; this is indispensable to resume activities.*

<sup>4</sup> ORIS is a network of organizations of waste pickers, their cooperatives and the MNCR, universities (UFMG, UNICAMP) and NGOs (INSEA, Sustentar, WIEGO).

The cascading social protection system designed by the Observatory presents an important innovation by looking beyond individual protection and introducing systems of collective protection in an integrated system of multiple barriers.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 10: Three levels of barriers and protection cycles**



Therefore, totally reshaping our systems of inclusive recycling is important if we take into consideration that waste pickers are an essential part of the economy, providing and sustaining the recycling market. They are service providers in urban cleaning and environmental agents, who contribute in mitigating the effects of climate change. Therefore, governments as well as industry have the duty to ensure the necessary conditions to allow these workers to perform this essential labour.

More than ever, we need strategic alliances for transformative changes in the sector, in which waste pickers, governments, civil society, industry and citizens are effectively committed to inclusive recycling. We need a daring redesign of inclusive recycling that endorses a platform of decent

work. We cannot return to how things were – it is imperative that we bounce forward not backwards. We need policies that transform, not just remedial ones!

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the system of multiple barriers, see ORIS, 2020.

**About WIEGO:** Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on securing livelihoods for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities and rights. WIEGO creates change by building capacity among informal worker organizations, expanding the knowledge base about the informal economy and influencing local, national and international policies. Visit [www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org).