

# Inclusive Recycling in Waste Picker Cooperatives in Brazil: Impacts of COVID-19 Comparative Analysis 2020-2021



By Sonia Dias, Ricardo Abussafy and Juliana Gonçalves

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**Cover Photograph:** Before COVID-19, a member of a waste picker cooperative in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, demonstrates the sorting process.  
Photo: WIEGO

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## Summary

- Cooperatives were able to quickly implement COVID-19 protocols in the sorting sheds, thus achieving greater credibility with public officers and greater security for cooperative members.
- The survey showed a significant increase in the number of suspected as well as confirmed cases of COVID-19. The number of confirmed cases declared in the survey had increased 40 per cent compared to the 2020 poll.
- The vaccination rate among waste pickers in this sample reached 78 per cent.
- Reported coping actions included capacity-building courses on COVID-19 protocols and fundraising campaigns for strengthening waste pickers' work.
- Cooperatives acted as a cushion against the impact of economic crises for waste pickers as many organizations had access to support including from the reverse logistics systems in place in Brazil.
- All surveyed cooperatives take part in reverse logistics programmes. This could have been a determining factor in their more positive adaptive responses during the first half of 2021, since industries have developed several programmes to support cooperatives in the pandemic.

## 1. Introduction

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, WIEGO [began producing technical notes, posters detailing protocols, and maps](#) of the initial impact of the pandemic on informal workers across various countries. In Brazil, this impact mapping focused on identifying how cooperatives of waste pickers (known as *catadores*<sup>1</sup> in Portuguese) were affected, and used a *Google Survey* and news monitoring approaches to assess their responses. The results were published in a comprehensive research [report](#), as well as a [shorter brief](#).

While the impact mapping was taking place in March 2020, the *Associação Brasileira de Engenharia Sanitária* (Brazilian Association of Sanitary Engineers or ABES) issued specific guidelines for the waste management sector. These included recommendations for temporary suspension of selective collection, transport, and sorting services, as an emergency preventative measure to mitigate the risks presented by COVID-19, and until the sector could produce adequate safeguards to ensure workers' health during the pandemic. After ABES issued this guidance, several municipalities declared the temporary closure of selective collection systems and suspended warehouse activities to reduce transmission risks among workers and to develop safety protocols for waste collection and sorting processes.

In the study presented in this report, all data was collected from *catador* cooperatives that take part in a Reverse Logistics Programme in which industries that produce and generate packaging are required by law (Law 12.305/2010) to invest in the return flows of these post-consumption materials and to prioritize the participation of *catadores* in this process. Hence, *catador* cooperatives perform the sorting, compressing, baling, and the sale of recovered recyclable materials to the recycling industry, and in some cases also carry out selective collection services. In return, waste-producing industries invest in cooperatives by providing cargo vehicles, equipment, improvements to the cooperatives' sorting warehouses, training and environmental education of cooperative members. In cases where other investments are not priorities for cooperatives because they already have functioning management and production conditions, payment per ton of recovered material is made by waste-producing industries. It is important to highlight that the data collected in this study represents a specific subset of *catador* cooperatives who have benefited from investments in reverse logistics. Many other *catador* cooperatives in Brazil face more precarious scenarios and lack monitoring mechanisms. Moreover, an even larger population of self-employed *catadores* works autonomously, without access to private or public investment of any kind.

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<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, the occupation of waste picker of recyclables – *catador/a de material reciclável* – is recognized in the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO in its acronym in Portuguese) No. 5192. *Catadores* can be autonomous workers or cooperative affiliates. In this publication, we use *catadores* to denote those who pick recyclable materials (not household waste).

The 2020 survey that WIEGO carried out attempted to identify the status of *catador* cooperatives, as well as mapping out how the partially or fully functioning cooperatives were receiving recyclable materials, and where they were being sent in light of the suspension of selective collection services. The survey also sought to identify the types of pandemic-related support that *catadores* had access to.

In the survey's second phase, conducted in 2021 during a less severe point in the pandemic, the researchers sought to understand the return to work under new COVID-19 safety protocols, changes in cooperatives' circumstances since the previous survey, and the impact of health and safety precautions on workers' productivity and income. The survey also identified rates of vaccination coverage, and coping activities like training processes and information dissemination that were necessary for adapting to the pandemic. Comparing the data collected by the two surveys helps shed light on the changing circumstances for *catadores* and the adaptations they have made since the beginning of the pandemic. Furthermore, by analyzing the data the researchers were able to identify trends.

Brazil is experiencing its worst health crisis in history with the COVID-19 pandemic, compounded by widespread chaos caused by the dismantling of public health networks and various social policies. Thus, systematically monitoring the pandemic's impact on the lives of individual *catadores* and their cooperatives can contribute to the design of appropriate public policies for the waste picking sector.

## 2. Methodology and Data Analysis

The database of *catador* cooperatives comes from the programme *Dê a Mão para o Futuro* (Lend a Hand to the Future).<sup>2</sup> The two surveys followed the same methodological processes for data collection, using a structured questionnaire created from the online platform *Google Forms*, with questions focused on the situation of *catador* cooperatives that take part in the COVID-19 pandemic programme organized by *Dê a Mão para o Futuro*.

In both phases of the study, surveys were administered either by technicians from the institutions that provide assistance to cooperatives through the *Dê a Mão para o Futuro* programme, or answered directly by cooperatives that no longer receive this technical support.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the findings involving data on *catadores*, for example the number of cases of COVID-19 or the number of *catadores* who are vaccinated, were reported by technicians from support institutions or else by cooperative leadership, and not by individuals themselves.

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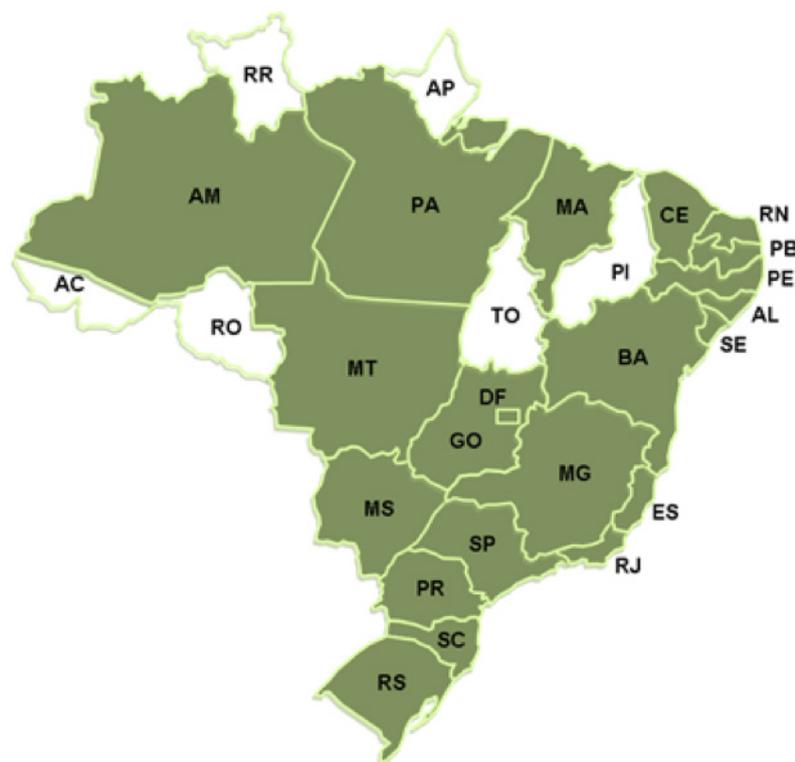
<sup>2</sup> This programme integrates 146 cooperatives into its platform through the Post-Consumption Packaging Return Reverse Logistics System.

<sup>3</sup> These institutions are non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or consulting companies hired by the programme to advise *catador* cooperatives with the objective of technical evolution, mainly around administrative and financial management, production processes, and material sales. Such institutions have had relationships with cooperatives for at least one year and some have been supporting them for more than five years. The fact that this link is consistent guarantees the reliability of the data.

In all, 15 technical assistance institutions were involved in the data collection process, or approximately 50 individual professionals. The online survey forms with instructions were distributed by email. Research coordinators answered questions that arose during the survey administration process.

The first phase of the survey collected information about April and May of 2020. In the survey's second phase, the questions asked about the same period one year later, April to May of 2021. Both surveys received similar rates of response: during the first period 130 cooperatives responded, representing 90 per cent of the total number of organizations participating in the programme. The second phase of data collection gathered information about the situation of COVID-19 cases in cooperatives and vaccination rates, and generated responses from 143 cooperatives.

**Figure 1: States in which surveyed cooperatives are located**

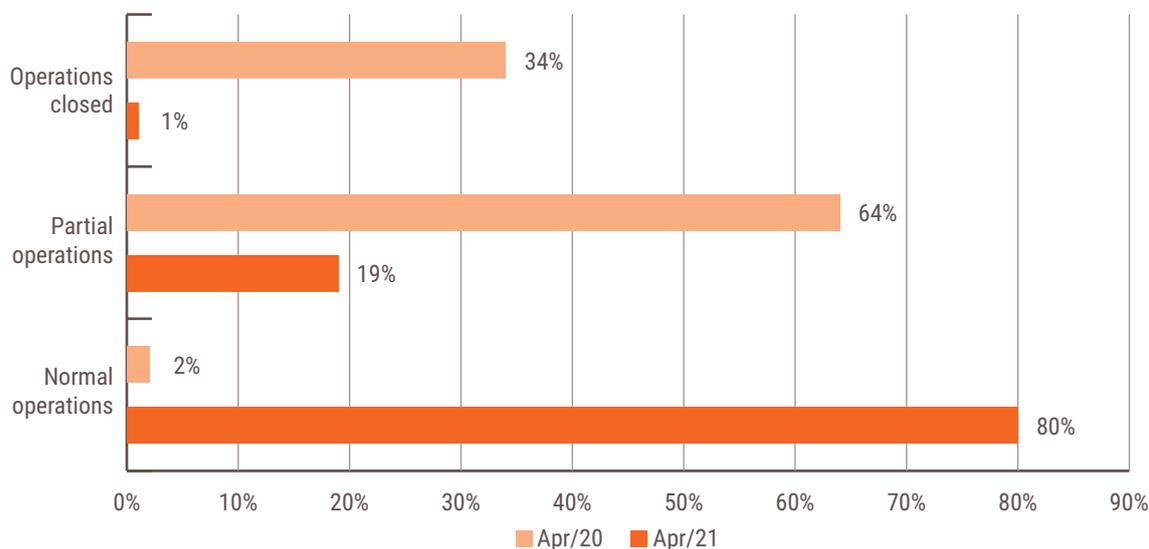


### 3. Operational Status of Cooperatives

In the early stages of the pandemic, *catador* cooperatives had to halt their activities, mainly due to municipal lockdowns and recommendations from ABES to suspend selective collection activities. During these initial months, cooperatives developed security protocols and adaptive measures in response to the pandemic. These adaptations prepared *catador* cooperatives for future waves of infection by instituting new sanitary norms to prevent the spread of the virus. In this way, cooperatives hoped to receive a

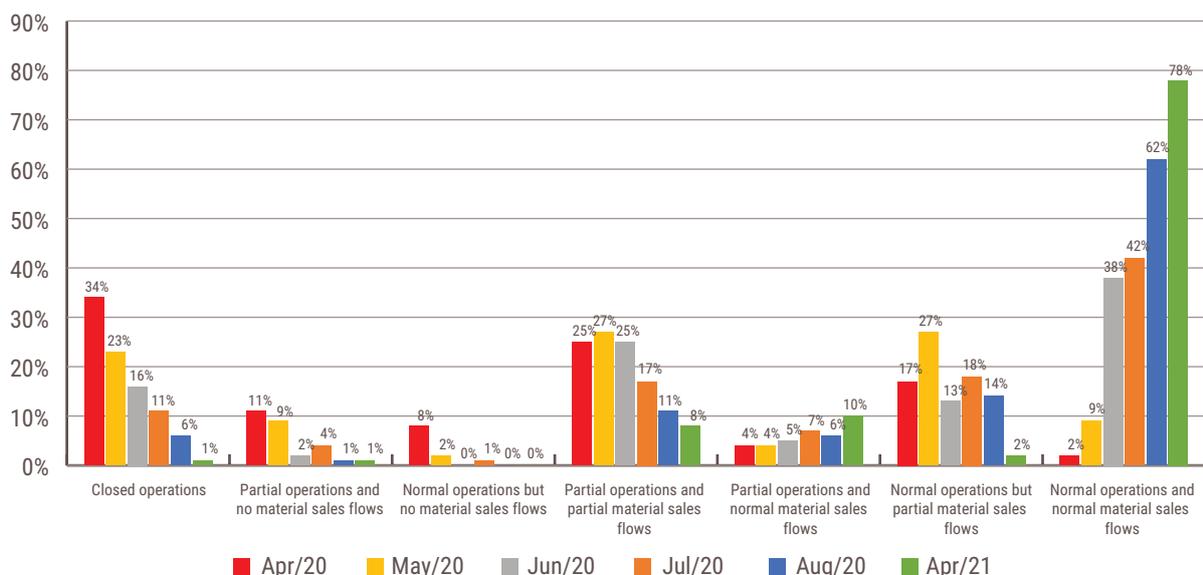
guarantee from municipal regulatory bodies that operations could continue. In 2020, the survey results indicated that the majority of *catador* cooperatives experienced an impact on their operations, with the harshest effects in April 2020. At this time, only 2% of cooperatives surveyed were functioning normally. In April of 2021, most cooperative enterprises (80%) had returned to normal operations and only 1% remained closed.

**Figure 2: Status of cooperatives participating in the study (2020 and 2021)**



By comparing the operational capacities of cooperatives that participated in the two surveys, the researchers identified a tendency to return to normal operations over time. The beginning of the pandemic heavily impaired the functions of *catador* cooperatives throughout Brazil.

**Figure 3: Details of cooperative operations (2020 and 2021)**



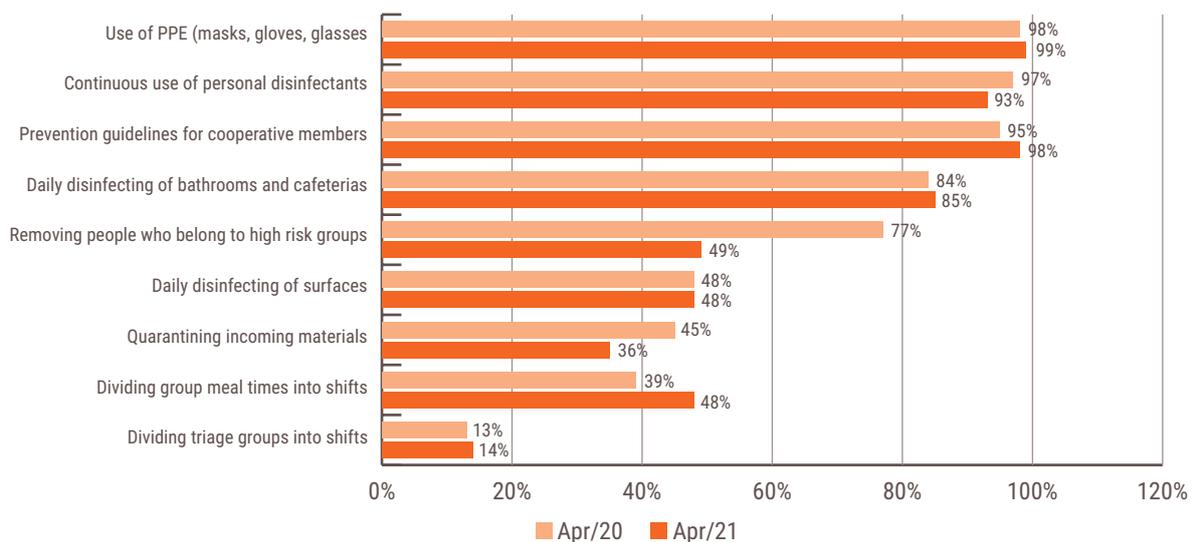
From Figure 3, it is possible to observe a recovery in operating status at different levels. A “partially operating” status may describe various situations, including cooperatives that are partially receiving materials, for example, only receiving materials from

large generators and not from selective collection processes. Alternatively, “partially operating” may describe limited internal operations, such as reduced hours or groups in the COVID-19 high risk categories staying home. In this scenario, sales of materials are combined, since some cooperatives had difficulty selling certain types of materials that had stable markets before the pandemic. Taking account of both operating situations and material sales flows, the survey results show a considerable recovery. For example, in May 2021, only 23 per cent of surveyed cooperatives reported total closure of operations, while 27 per cent reported partial operationality and decreased material sales flows, and another 27 per cent reported normal operations, albeit with partial sales flows. With regard to material sales flows, it is noteworthy that 19 per cent of cooperatives with partial or normal operations reported being unable to sell any type of material at all. These difficulties may be due to the fact that many recycling companies and intermediary buyers had to close their operations until they adjusted to new sanitary protocols, or else experienced bans on road travel, especially in April 2020. The data shows a considerable recovery by April 2021, with 78 per cent of surveyed cooperatives reporting normal operations and regular material sales flows. However, 8 per cent of surveyed cooperatives are still experiencing partial operations and decreased material sales flows, and 10 per cent are still operating only partially. These numbers indicate a recovery, but also warn of the difficulties that the pandemic has presented to a considerable percentage of *catador* cooperatives.

#### 4. COVID-19 Protocols and Mapping Cases of *Catadores* with COVID-19

With regard to the protocols adopted by cooperatives to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the survey shows roughly consistent rates of infection between the two data collection periods, with two exceptions.

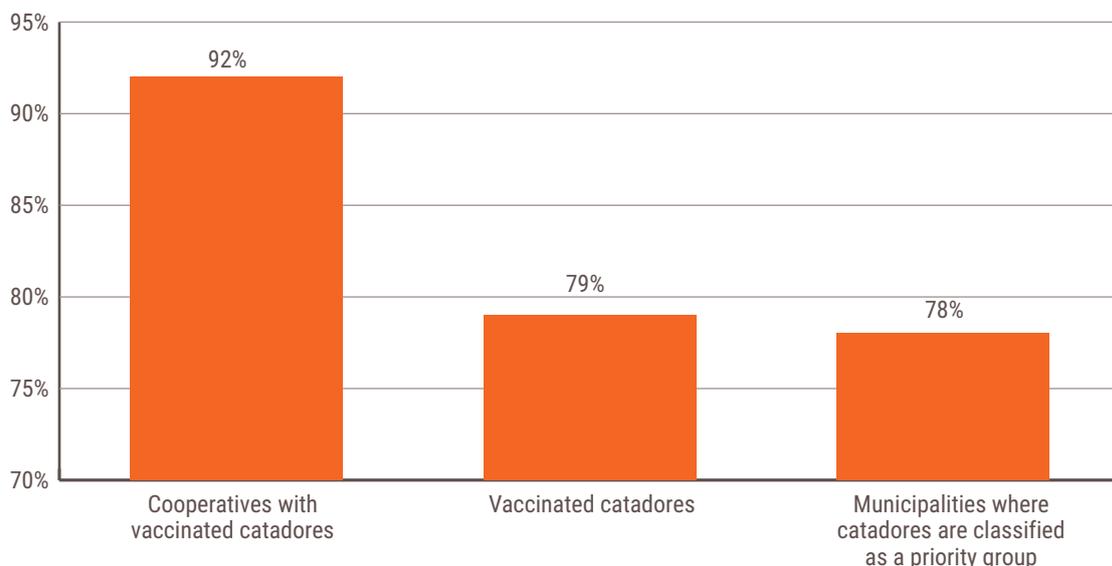
**Figure 4: Adoption of COVID-19 protocols**



The greatest variation in the data on prevention protocols concerns removing people in high-risk groups from the workplace. In 2020, 77 per cent of surveyed *catador* enterprises were adhering to this protocol, whereas in 2021 this figure had decreased to 49 per cent. This change may be due to changes in safety protocols in 2021, or the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, in which at-risk populations were given priority.

In Brazil, vaccinations began on February 17, 2021 and have been slowly progressing. As of August 30, 2021, 69.7 per cent of Brazil's population had received at least one dose of vaccine. Regarding rates of vaccination among the 5,278 individual members of the *catador* cooperatives that responded to the survey, 4,178 had received at least their first dose, which represents 79 per cent of the population. Other relevant data shows that, of the 102 municipalities in which the 143 cooperatives are located, 80 (78 per cent of the total) have issued municipal decrees classifying *catadores* as essential workers and designated them as priority groups for vaccination. Finally, regarding vaccination data, it is noteworthy that 13 of the 143 *catador* cooperatives (9.1 per cent) declared that their members had not yet been vaccinated.

**Figure 5: Vaccination situation (August 2021)**



As for the rate of COVID-19 incidence among catadores, in comparison to the data from the previous study, it is clear that in the interval between the two studies there was an exponential increase in cases, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: COVID-19 cases in participating cooperatives**

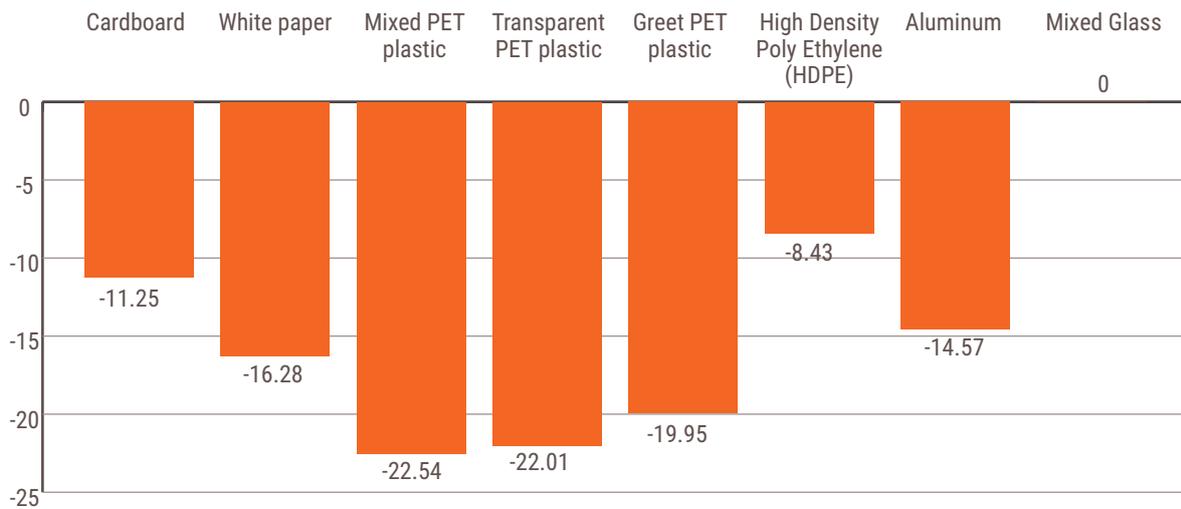
	2020 (April)	2021 (August)
Total suspected cases	51	895
Average number of suspected cases per cooperative	0.4	6.25
Confirmed cases	1	606
Average number of confirmed cases per cooperative	0	4.23
Access to <i>Serviço Único de Saúde</i> (Unified Health Service)	4	594
Deaths	0	5

The survey showed a significant increase in the number of suspected as well as confirmed cases. It is noteworthy that the number of confirmed cases declared in the survey is representative, being 40 per cent of the combined total of 1,501 suspected and confirmed cases. Fortunately, the number of deaths has not increased by the same proportion, totalling five deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, all of which were confirmed to be caused by COVID-19 infection. The survey also showed significant increases in rates of access to Brazil's public health-care system *Serviço Único de Saúde* (Unified Health Service), totalling 594 people, compared to only four in the April 2020 survey.

## 5. Economic Impacts and Catadores' Coping Strategies

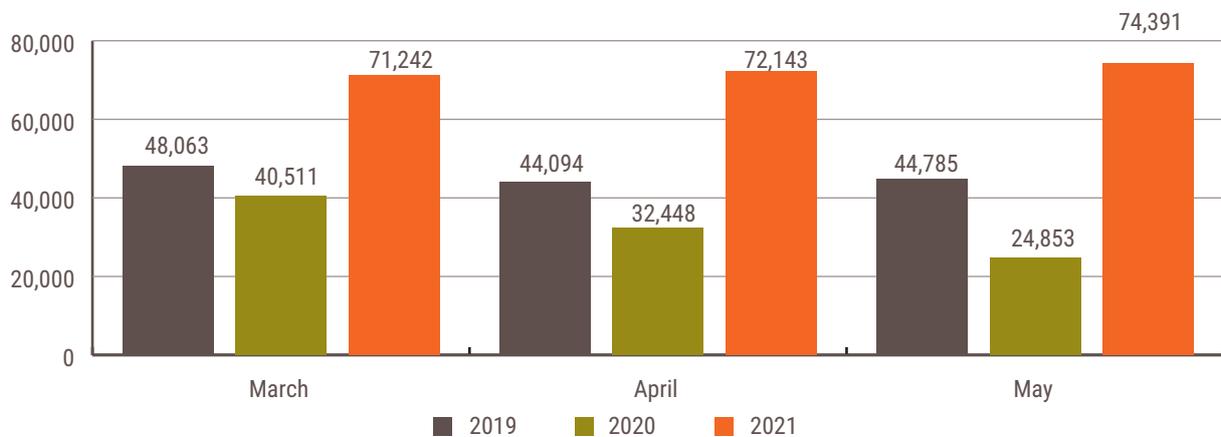
With regard to the economic impact of the pandemic, there are again some contrasts when comparing across the two survey periods. From February to July 2020 in Brazil, state and municipal restrictions prohibited activities deemed non-essential, for example the operations of *catador* cooperatives, but also sorting warehouses for intermediary buyers of recyclable materials and recycling companies. In some cases, public authorities banned trucks from entering other states if they were not transporting products considered essential, such as food and medicine. In other cases, recycling companies stopped purchasing recyclable materials until it was possible to assess the risk of contagion posed by transporting and handling these materials. As shown in the 2020 study, the value of the main recyclable materials sold by cooperatives fell, causing a 29 per cent drop in cooperatives' gross revenue (a comparative average between the months of March, April and May of 2019 and 2020).

**Figure 6: Comparison between percentage drops in sales value by material type**



However, as the following table shows, there is a very significant increase in the gross revenue of projects when comparing 2021 against the same months in 2019 and 2020. Taking 2019 as a reference year for a normal recyclables market, it is possible to see the significant negative impact on cooperatives in the same period in 2020, but also by contrast the surprisingly positive recovery observed in 2021 over the same period.

**Figure 7: Average gross revenue (BRL/month)**

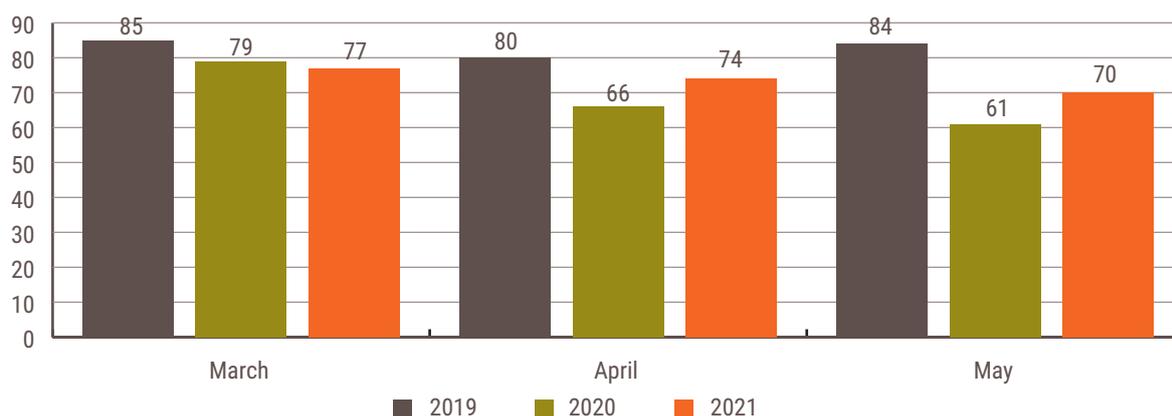


In this comparison, the average material values shown for each period in Figure 7 is BRL45,648 (USD11,570) in 2019, BRL32,604 (USD6,214) in 2020 and BRL72,592 (USD13,590) in 2021. This represents a 29 per cent decrease in the average results between 2019 and 2020, and a 59 per cent increase in 2021, using 2019 as the reference year for each comparison. Comparing the results obtained between 2020 and 2021, the increase is even more significant (123 per cent).

The rise in material values is due to the growing demand for disposable packaging, as these materials play a role in strategies to prevent COVID-19 infection.<sup>4</sup> Recycling companies report a lack of secondary raw materials for their production processes, thus increasing demand for materials and driving price hikes in the market. However, by analyzing market trends, it is possible to infer that this sudden increase in recycling prices may be a temporary anomaly that is largely due to circumstances created by the pandemic. Prices are beginning to stabilize as pandemic controls advance due to expanded vaccination rates and more flexible COVID-19 protocols in large urban centres, which may signal a return to normal or even lower prices.

Despite the anomaly in material prices that precipitated increased revenues for surveyed *catador* cooperatives, the data also showed a slight drop in cooperatives' productivity in 2021, compared to the same reference points as in the previous table (March, April and May 2019). Productivity dropped by an average of 10 percentage points across the three-month data collection period, as shown in the following figure. In other words, analyzing the pandemic impact on revenue in isolation does not show a complete picture of trends and impacts on cooperatives over the long term.

**Figure 8: Average productivity (tons/month)**



Different factors may justify the slump in cooperatives' productivity as measured against 2019 standards. For example, in 2020, many cooperatives had their production flows compromised due to total or partial interruptions to their operations, and experienced other market difficulties that were presented in the 2020 study and highlighted in this comparative analysis. In 2021, the difficulties that cooperatives experienced were not related to the internal productivity of sorting warehouses, nor a lack of recyclable materials on the market, but rather to an earlier step in the process: receiving deliveries of recyclable materials to cooperative sorting warehouses.

<sup>4</sup> <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/economia/noticia/2020-10/comercio-eletronico-e-delivery-aumentam-consumo-de-embalagens> [July 22, 2021].

Analyzing this low productivity is necessary to understand how the impact of the pandemic may be felt more strongly over time, as cooperatives' revenue primarily depends on the volume of materials they collect. Cooperatives may continue to experience long-term difficulties as they face obstacles such as few options for diversifying revenues, low prices, limited coverage of selective collection due to few materials available on the street, and disputes with autonomous *catadores*.

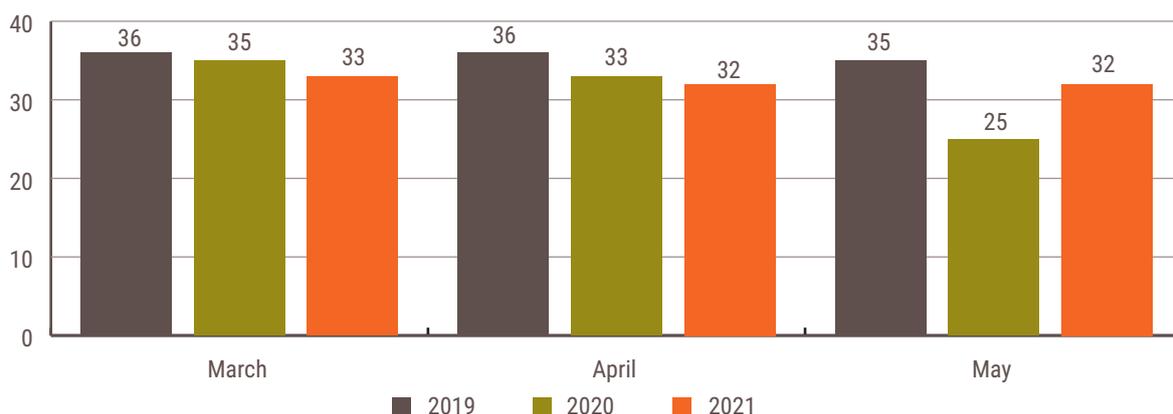
With the pandemic-related economic crisis tied to the steep rise in COVID-19 cases in the country and a growing unemployment rate, many workers began collecting recyclable materials to earn or supplement income, attracted by the high prices of recyclable materials described above. Many of these self-employed *catadores* collect the materials that are separated by residents and disposed of in the streets, especially those with higher retail prices, before they are taken by conventional garbage collection or selective collection services (which may be operated by city halls, private companies or contracted *catador* cooperatives). The gravitation to autonomous waste picking as an alternative income source in times of economic crisis and high unemployment is currently further accelerated due to the rising values of recyclable materials. With autonomous *catadores* collecting material that would otherwise be destined for cooperatives, and minor selective collection programmes that serve only a small portion of municipal populations, cooperatives have experienced difficulty returning to their normal productivity levels. In addition, the high prices of recyclable materials have become attractive for large waste generators such as supermarkets and shopping malls, which have begun selling their waste to generate revenue.<sup>5</sup>

With regard to the number of members of cooperative affiliates, the data shows that after a drop in cooperative membership in May 2020 (with the greatest interruptions to cooperatives' operations) a modest recovery was observed in 2021. However, this was still slightly below the average of 35-36 registered members per cooperative in the same period in 2019.

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5 <https://www.hojeemdia.com.br/primeiro-plano/economia/recic%C3%A1vel-vira-ouro-pre%C3%A7o-de-venda-de-itens-como-latinhas-sobe-mas-catadores-n%C3%A3o-se-beneficiam-1.839481>

**Figure 9: Monthly average number of *catadores* per cooperative**



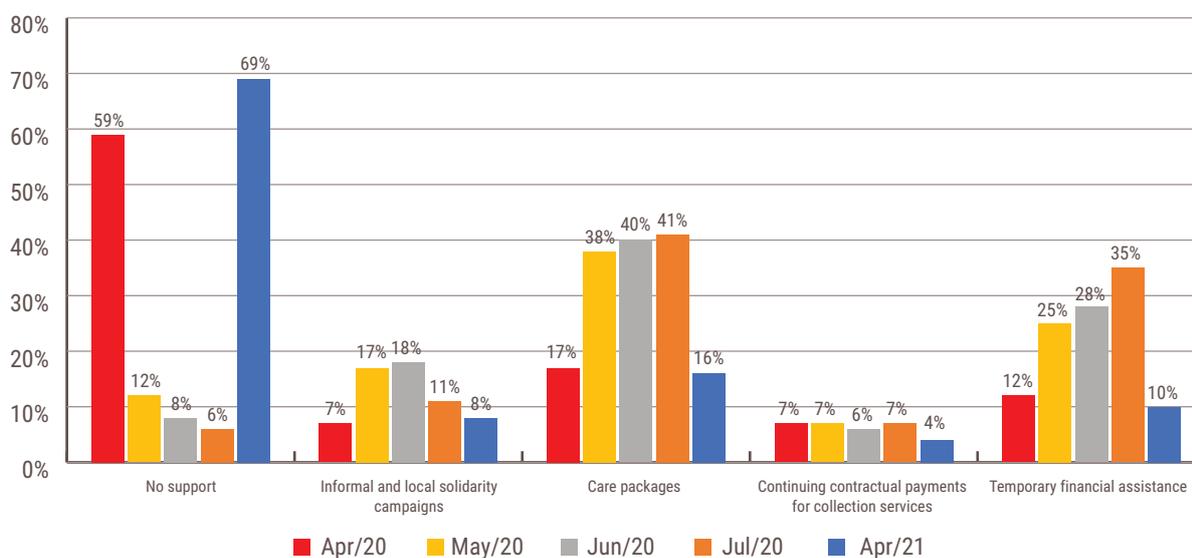
It is anticipated that, just as the high market prices combined with the growth in unemployment attracted people to become autonomous *catadores*, the rise in revenues from waste picking and the still growing rate of unemployment will lead to a recovery in membership rates in workers' cooperatives.

## 6. Coping Strategies and Activities

Some of the coping measures developed since the beginning of the pandemic include fundraising campaigns to help ensure food security and access to hygiene products, emergency income, training courses for adopting new protocols, distribution of protective equipment and technical assistance for the operation of *catador* cooperatives.

The survey found a gradual evolution of support strategies since July 2020. Comparing this period to April 2021, there has been a significant decrease in supportive activities for members of *catador* cooperatives. Sixty-nine per cent of cooperatives report that their members no longer receive any type of aid as of April 2021, and note that all types of support decreased between 2020 and 2021.

**Figure 10: Types of support available to *catadores* during COVID-19**

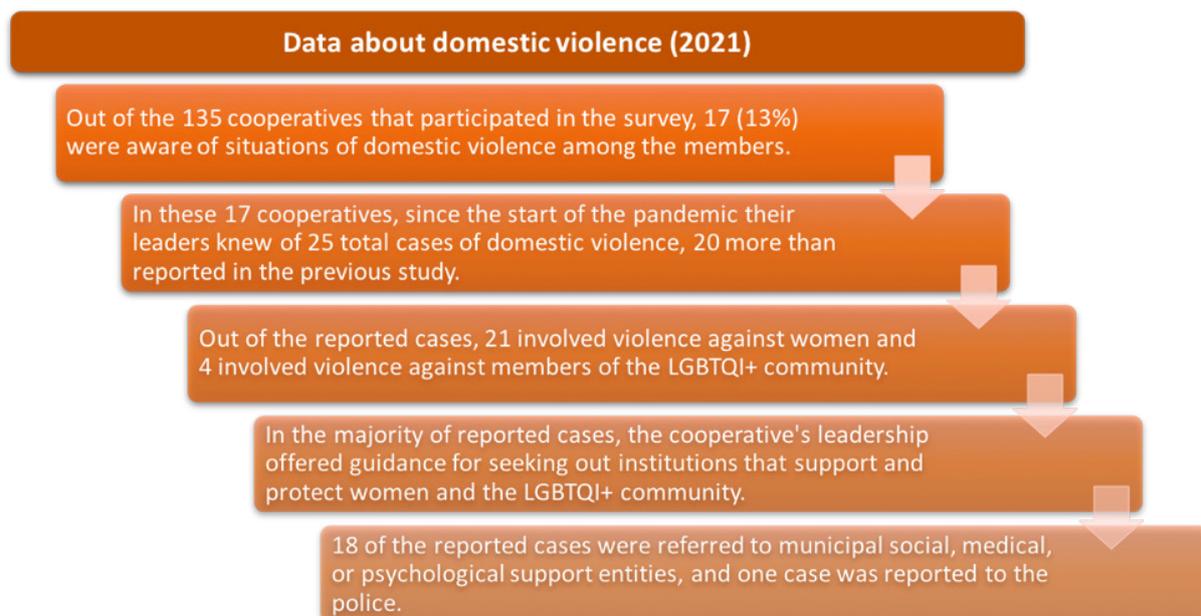


Other actions to fight COVID-19 were aimed at answering questions and/or providing training and guidance on maintaining safety at work and containing the pandemic. Among the cooperatives that participated in the second phase of the survey, 38.5 per cent said that they had access to some kind of training process or guidance to construct protocols that would increase safety and reduce of the risk of contagion in the work environment. This included courses offered by NGOs and public authorities, city hall technicians who go to warehouses to provide guidance, and expanded courses like [Cata-Saúde](#), Viraliza – an online training course for *catadores* offered by WIEGO and partners, with resources from Open Society Foundations

## 7. Situations of Urban and Gender Violence

With their requirement of domestic confinement, lockdowns caused many women to have to stay at home in situations of violence. The survey showed that violence is still a reality for cooperative members, and some cooperatives have followed up to support victims of violence.

**Figure 11: Domestic violence data**



During the survey, respondents reported situations of violence against female *catadores* while working in city streets. The reports included situations of threats with firearms, knives, and verbal threats by people in disputes over recycled material. These situations happened to *catadores* on their formal routes of municipal selective collection, and involved other *catadores* who were competing for recyclable material. Such circumstances create insecurity and fear for female *catadores* at work.

## 8. Conclusions

The data analysis from the two mappings allowed researchers to observe different scenarios within the pandemic context (2020 and 2021) as well as make comparisons with the pre-pandemic situation (2019). The findings corroborate the importance of monitoring the pandemic's impact on the cooperative sector.

Cooperatives have the capacity to adapt to these adverse situations. All of the surveyed cooperatives take part in reverse logistics programmes, which could have been one of the determining factors in their more positive adaptive responses during the first half of 2021, since industries have developed several programmes to support cooperatives during the pandemic. Another important aspect in the cooperatives' adaptiveness was municipalities' initial COVID prevention measures, which halted many economic activities but also gave rise to the designation of waste picking as an essential work activity. This classification allowed cooperatives to resume their normal operations. Cooperatives rapidly introduced a set of COVID-19 protocols and in this way gained more credibility with public authorities.

Another highlight is the vaccination rate among *catadores*. While the general rate among Brazilians was 69.7 per cent with at least one vaccine dose as of August 2021, among *catadores* in cooperatives this rate reached 78 per cent. This advance could be due to the fact that in 80 per cent of the cities where surveyed cooperatives were located, *catadores* have been categorized as essential workers, which classifies them as a priority for vaccination. Classifying *catador* cooperatives as essential public health services could have an effect beyond the pandemic, with the recognition bringing new dialogue between these enterprises and local authorities, for example.

A third highlight is the socioeconomic impacts highlighted in the comparisons between 2019, 2020 and 2021. It is possible to observe, for example, that the average production in the months of March, April and May in these years was 80 tons/month, 74 tons/month and 72 tons/month respectively, which implies a 10 per cent drop in productivity between 2019 and 2021. However, the reasons for this drop in production are not clear and further research could help in this regard. This trend may be due to several factors, including the economic crisis combined with the direct dependence on revenue from the amount of material collected, which has been affected by the interruption of selective collection. The drop could also be explained by the low coverage and adherence to municipalities' selective collection systems, lack of hiring for service provisions, and disputes over materials with more autonomous *catadores* on the streets.

In contrast to the fall in productivity, there was an upturn in the market for purchasing recyclables, and as a consequence, an increase in revenue for cooperatives. As we saw, in comparison to 2019, after a 29 per cent drop in cooperatives' revenues in 2020, there was a 59 per cent increase in revenues in 2021. While there is still no data to inform the technical and scientific literature on these trends, an article in the newspaper *Valor Econômico* (03/27/2021), quoted resin and packaging manufacturers on factors contributing to the high prices of recycled raw material. These included pandemic-related logistical problems causing a drop in material supplies, an unexpected increase in consumption at the beginning of 2021, the devaluation of Brazil's currency against the U.S. dollar, and the rise in commodity prices in the global market.

Finally, a significant improvement in the responsiveness of *catador* cooperatives to changing market conditions can be observed. Examples include adjusting their operations and responding to different sale values of materials, which resulted in improved revenue and consequently higher worker incomes. However, at the same time there has been a decline in support provided to *catador* cooperatives, from solidarity campaigns to temporary financial aid. In such an unstable context, improvements in market conditions like those currently observed can fluctuate in the medium term, and thus bear the risk of a decline in cooperative revenues and in *catadores'* incomes. Therefore, we believe it is necessary to take advantage of the recognition of cooperatives as essential service providers for municipalities. *Catadores* continue to face significant socioeconomic fragility, and support strategies continue to be necessary throughout the pandemic period, until circumstances reach greater stability over a longer time frame.

Despite the difficulties they face, cooperatives cushion their members from the worst effects of the economic crisis, through the group support networks as well as through advanced levels of organization and expanded support. However, cooperatives may be walking a tightrope due to market anomalies, a lack of remuneration contracts, and the suspension of selective collection systems. It is essential that governments and institutions design policies that invest in structuring the cooperative sector so that these organizations can offer greater protections to workers. It is also essential to devise innovations that foster cooperation and protections for *catadores* who work autonomously and who constitute the majority of all *catadores*.



## About WIEGO

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