



Women in Informal Employment:  
Globalizing and Organizing

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



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**Cover Photo:**

*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*

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## **Acronyms**

ABES – Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering

ABHIPEC - Brazilian Association of Cosmetics, Toiletry and Fragrance Industry

ANCAT – National Association of Waste Pickers

CBO – Brazilian National Classification of Occupations

COVID-19 – Novel coronavirus

FNLC – National Waste and Citizenship Forum

IPEA – Institute of Applied Economic Research

MNCR – National Movement of Pickers of Recyclables

MTE – Ministry of Labour and Employment

ORIS – Observatory of Inclusive Recycling

PNAD – National Household Sample Survey

PNRS – National Solid Waste Policy

PPE – Personal Protective Equipment

SNIS – National Sanitation Information

SUS – National Health System

WHO – World Health Organization

WIEGO – Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing

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# Introduction

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**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 Waste and Citizenship Forum 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 was consolidated as the main entity representing waste pickers.

Working on their own (mostly connected by scrap dealers) or organized through associations and cooperatives, the 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 non-iron-made materials and other re-usable materials” (MTE/CBO). In 2002, the Brazilian National Classification of Occupations (CBO) recognized waste collecting as a profession 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 on the streets due to their homeless status.

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 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 the systems of segregated waste collection and cooperatives of waste pickers, given the crucial role these play in the livelihood of waste pickers and their families. The capacity of urban systems of solid waste 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 study 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 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), 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<sup>1</sup>

### Description of news tracking methodology

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>2</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. 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 collection.

### Data processing

After the news items were compiled, the data was processed to identify the main trends and actors in the mapping, their significance and the main impacts of COVID-19 on waste pickers and the systems of segregated waste collection in the main cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Sonia Dias and Ana Ogando, with support from Livia Lopes.

<sup>2</sup> Keywords: *catadores* (waste pickers), *catadores de materiais recicláveis* (waste pickers of recyclable materials), *catadores de lixo* (trash waste pickers), *carroceiros* (carters).

The first step of this process was the selection of the common elements in all news items regardless of the importance of the reports. Therefore, basic categories of analysis of interviews were selected, according to the following criteria:

- **WHERE**  
Basic selection according to location in Brazil. It could be a municipal or a state-wide measure – these were generally enacted by state parliaments or state justice departments.
- **WHAT**  
The main focus of the news item. The following categories corresponded to the main trends:
  - Municipal actions
  - Public policies
  - Responses by collectives of waste pickers
  - Responses by civil society
  - Impact on the productivity chain
- **WHO IS INVOLVED**  
Identification of the actors in the events described, which could be institutions of urban cleaning, COVID-19 crisis committees (government), a politician, the cooperatives themselves, among others.
- **PROMOTED**  
Detailed description, where necessary, of the kind of support involved. The basic categories were PPEs, social protection, and financial support.
- **FOR HOW LONG**  
Duration of the support measure, although this information was not always clear in the news items and may not have been part of the planning process for the intervention.
- **REFERENCES**  
News sources.

### **Data identification per region**

Taking into account Brazil's large population (over 212 million people), its large geographical area and the country's huge socioeconomic inequalities, the study was divided by the main regions of Brazil: Centre-West, South-East, North-East, South and North.

Also, to allow a more detailed analysis of the trends identified, mini-regional cases were developed on the main cities that illustrated the trends. These took into account their strategic importance in the creation of trends in response to the pandemic or their historical relevance in the context of segregated waste collection. These cities were:

**Table 1: Selected cities in regions of Brazil. Source: Authors, 2020**

Region	City	Importance
Centre-West	Brasília	Brasília is the capital of Brazil and the main urban core of the Federal District. As well as having the highest GDP in the country, it has several urban innovations and sets trends in urban management. The city suspended the services of segregated waste collection, but established a municipal basic income.
South-East	Belo Horizonte	Belo Horizonte has been a historical reference for segregated collection policies since the 1990s. In managing the COVID-19 pandemic, the city implemented one of the most restrictive lockdowns in the country with positive epidemiological results. The municipality has a long tradition of participatory governance (Fórum Municipal Lixo e Cidadania).
North-East	Fortaleza	Fortaleza is among the 10 biggest cities in the country and has grown rapidly in the last few years. It has become one of the cities most affected by the pandemic not only in Brazil's North-East but in Latin America.



<b>South</b>	Porto Alegre	The trends observed in the South of Brazil were very different to those in other regions and keeping segregated collection operational was prioritized.
<b>North</b>	Manaus	Although it is one of the most geographically isolated cities in Latin America, Manaus suffered a large number of COVID-19 infections and merits closer attention. It is a major economic power and, with its industrial centre, is an important communications centre in the North of the country. However, it suffers from the precarious infrastructure of the Amazon region.

### ***Cross-checking verification***

Analysis of news items in a time of crisis requires a swift methodology in order to compile information, which is often not coordinated, and ensure the analysis is able to be done rapidly. An important measure we took to avoid risks of quality loss and increase the precision of the analysis was cross-checking with other news compilers on the same topic, undertaken by specialists in the sector of segregated waste collection.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, constant verifications were conducted with information collected informally in the specialist and cooperative networks of segregated collection in which the authors of this study take part. It is crucial to remember that cooperatives and individuals who participated in the study were very active on social media, participated in webinars and gave online presentations and speeches; hearing and amplifying the voices of workers in the sector.<sup>4</sup>

### **Identifying key trends**

The crisis caused by COVID-19 has been characterized as a large-scale crisis affecting not only global health and economies, but also global economic production and business management, food chains, value chains such as recycling, and other urban systems including the solid-waste system.

The main trends identified in this news tracking, which correspond with the first phase of the pandemic, include initial mitigation strategies and, in some cities, the design of coordination strategies among different actors for an enhanced response to the crisis. The main trends found are described and summarized in Figure 6: COVID-19 Trends in Inclusive Recycling.

### ***Trends in municipal systems of segregated waste collection***

Segregated collection services are not available in all Brazilian municipalities. However, in the municipalities in which such services exist, they are an important basis of the work of cooperatives and associations of collectors. In Brazil, municipal governments are responsible for the official urban system of segregated collection in approximately 22 per cent of Brazilian municipalities (SNIS, 2018 Yearbook ANCAT, 2019).

One of the response measures to COVID-19, to avoid spreading of the virus, was the recommendation of temporary suspension of segregated collection and provision of basic income support to waste pickers issued by the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (ABES), through a technical note.

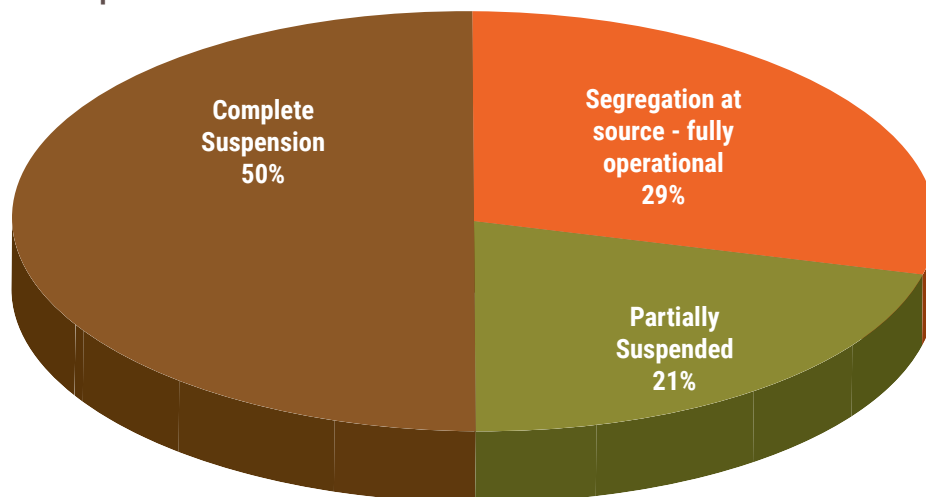
As Figure 1 indicates, not all Brazilian municipalities suspended segregated collection and one can see a diversity of approaches. Some municipalities chose to suspend only door-to-door segregated collection and kept it unit by unit.

In other cases, collection was maintained rigorously through strict measures to avoid spread of infection. In the municipalities in which there was an official decree to suspend collection, the system was under lockdown and, as a result, the groups of waste pickers were immediately impacted. In a few situations of collection shutdown, the need for income support was foreseen by municipal officials.

<sup>3</sup> We complemented our compilation with the contributions of colleagues from the Technical Chamber of the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (ABES) – Andrea Portugal – and from the Observatory of Inclusive Recycling – Jacqueline Rotkowski – to ensure that relevant news was not missed and coherence of news sources.

<sup>4</sup> Disclaimer: although we systematically collected news throughout the first two months of the pandemic, we do not claim to have tracked every single relevant news item.

**Figure 1: Operations reported in news**



Source: Authors, 2020

### ***Trends in the functioning of sorting sheds***

Due to scientific evidence showing that the new coronavirus remains on surfaces, the sorting sheds were considered high-risk places of contamination.

Some cooperatives stopped their activities in the sheds on their own initiative, to gather information and find ways to restructure their operations so that waste pickers could continue working safely. Other cooperatives had to stop their activities due to a lack of recyclable materials; a consequence of suspension of segregated collection, which led to empty sheds and no choice other than shutdown. In other municipalities, the recommendation for immediate closure of the sorting sheds of cooperatives and associations was issued directly by local government.

The groups that continued operating in the sorting sheds created operational safety protocols to contain the spread of the virus, both in collection and sorting of the materials. These operational protocols included, for example, quarantining the materials for 72 hours, new ways of door-to-door collection that considered the need for social distancing, and adopting new and specific safety equipment, among other measures.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Trends in emergency measures for workers***

As Brazil's President minimized the severity of the pandemic from the very beginning and acted to demobilize social isolation, there was no governmental coordination on the national level related to emergency support measures to workers in segregated collection. There were also no guidelines about protection needs and special care for professionals working in urban cleaning services, including segregated collection.<sup>6</sup>

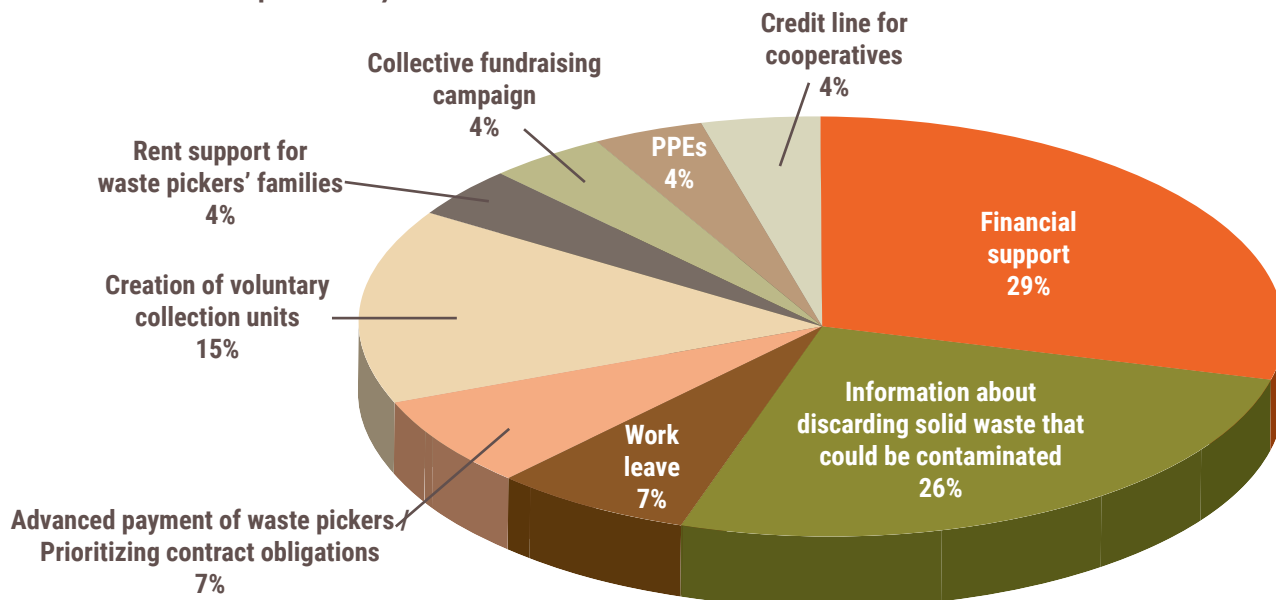
The emergency income approved in the National Congress was a victory due to the prominence of social movements and their allies in Parliament and Congress, which forced the President to approve the support. However, we managed to compile a set of measures applied by several municipalities, with the goal of protecting these workers. The support measures did not happen only through the work of public officials, but also through that of civil society and the private sector, through campaigns and, of course, from the cooperatives themselves, to protect their members and their financial survival as organizations.

Next, we can see which were the main measures of social protection. It is important to note that the measures were analyzed as a whole and a city or region could have applied more than one measure.

<sup>5</sup> The recommendation to suspend manual sorting activities did not stop the functioning of the mega-mechanized stations in the municipality of Sao Paulo, which remained active.

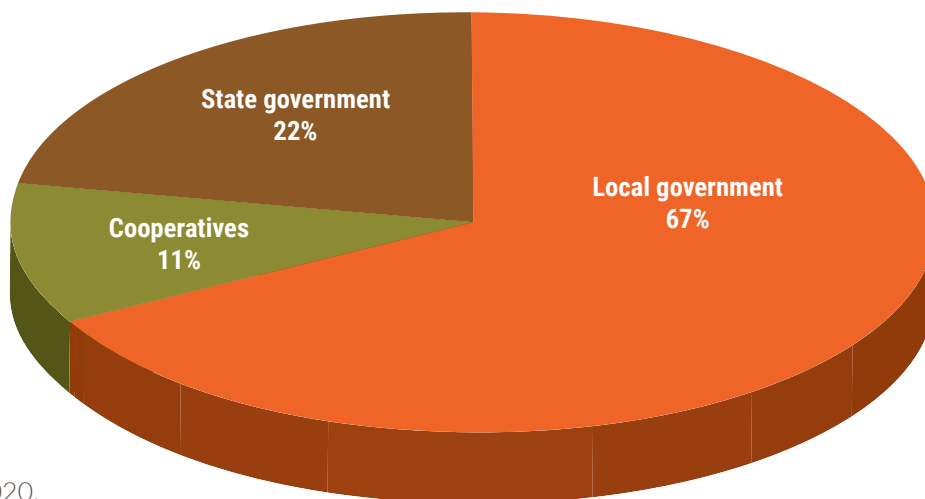
<sup>6</sup> Civil society entities played a major role. In the beginning of the pandemic, WIEGO through its project *Cuida* formed groups of specialists from the University of Brasilia and FUNED and produced a technical note with guidelines and posters for cooperatives of waste pickers (<https://www.wiego.org/resources/o-coronavirus-e-pessoas-recicladoras-reducao-dos-riscos>), and ABES then published the technical note. Many others followed, with several societal actors. At a later stage, the Public Ministry also issued technical notes but there were no more from the executive authorities.

Figure 2: Measures reported by the media.



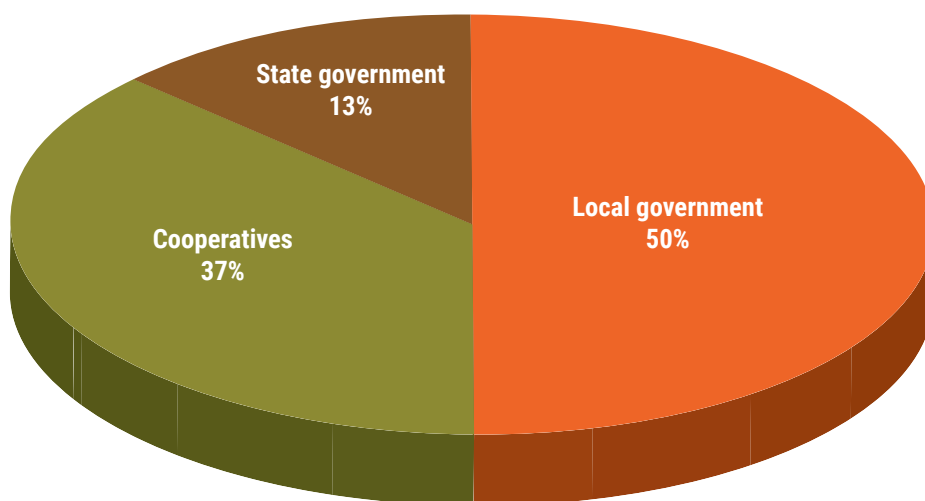
Source: Authors, 2020.

Figure 3: Food security measures.



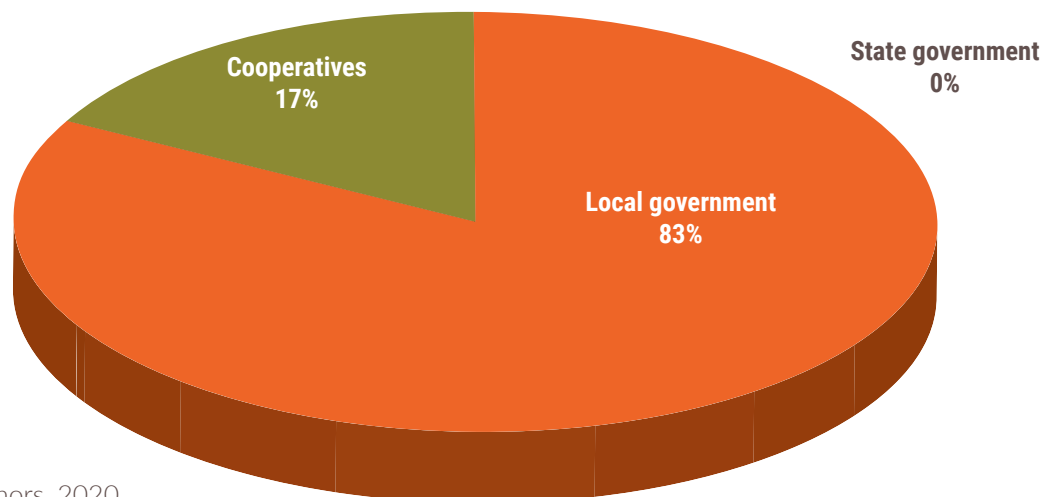
Source: Authors, 2020.

Figure 4: Financial support measures.



Source: Authors, 2020.

**Figure 5: Information about deliberate discarding of solid waste that could be contaminated.**



Source: Authors, 2020.

Considering some emergency measures, we can see that most referred largely to basic income measures, initiatives from the collectors' movements for food security and financial support and initiatives from other actors.

### **Public policies – emergency basic income**

Perhaps the most important public policy on a macro level was access to emergency income for low-income workers affected by the COVID-19 crisis, announced by the federal government. This support was BRL600,00 paid in three monthly instalments. After the subsidy was announced, several controversies ensued related to accessibility. Barriers including the struggle to cover all workers, delays in individual evaluation and the need to have internet access to submit the request, resulted in the strategy excluding significant numbers of affected workers. Subsequently, the President of the Republic suspended access to this subsidy to the professional category of waste pickers of recyclable materials, although several waste pickers were able to receive the first payment before the exclusion measure was decreed.

On a regional level, there were several state and municipal measures. Many states offered emergency basic income or support for food security through Essential Food Baskets to specific collectives of workers.<sup>7</sup> Waste pickers were considered to be informal workers, members of cleaning cooperatives and were also targeted by specific policies regarding their work category – cleaning and sanitation. These measures originated both in state justice and in Assembly of States.

The municipal measures were more focused on the category of workers and many were bound to contracts between municipalities and cooperatives working in the city. Many of these measures were set up directly by urban cleaning agencies or municipal offices of basic sanitation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Measures by the social movement MNCR**

Across Brazil, cooperatives and waste pickers' associations were mobilized for support to protect recycling workers. These support measures were ensured through awareness-raising and fundraising campaigns. As a result, support was raised for the distribution of food baskets, hygiene kits and PPEs.

One of the most important actions at the national level was the creation of an emergency support fund by the National Movement of Pickers of Recyclables (MNCR), which distributed cards with food vouchers to members of the ANCAT – National Association of Waste Pickers.<sup>9</sup> Besides the national

<sup>7</sup> The states which proposed emergency measures related to basic income or food security were Amazonas, Paraná, Minas Gerais and, for protection equipment, Mato Grosso.

<sup>8</sup> The cities which instituted basic income were Brasília (DF), Cuiabá (MT), São Paulo (SP), Vitória (ES), Vila Velha (ES), Serra (ES), Cariacica (ES), Salvador (BA).

<sup>9</sup> ANCAT and MNCR did a national level search, finding partnerships to register waste pickers in need to extend the right to access support. For more information: <http://www.mnrc.org.br/noticias/noticias-regionais/protecao-dos-profissionais-da-catacao-de-materiais-reciclaveis>

campaign, some cooperatives and associations across Brazil also promoted individual campaigns to gather resources to pay for fixed expenses and to keep the organization fully functioning.<sup>10</sup>

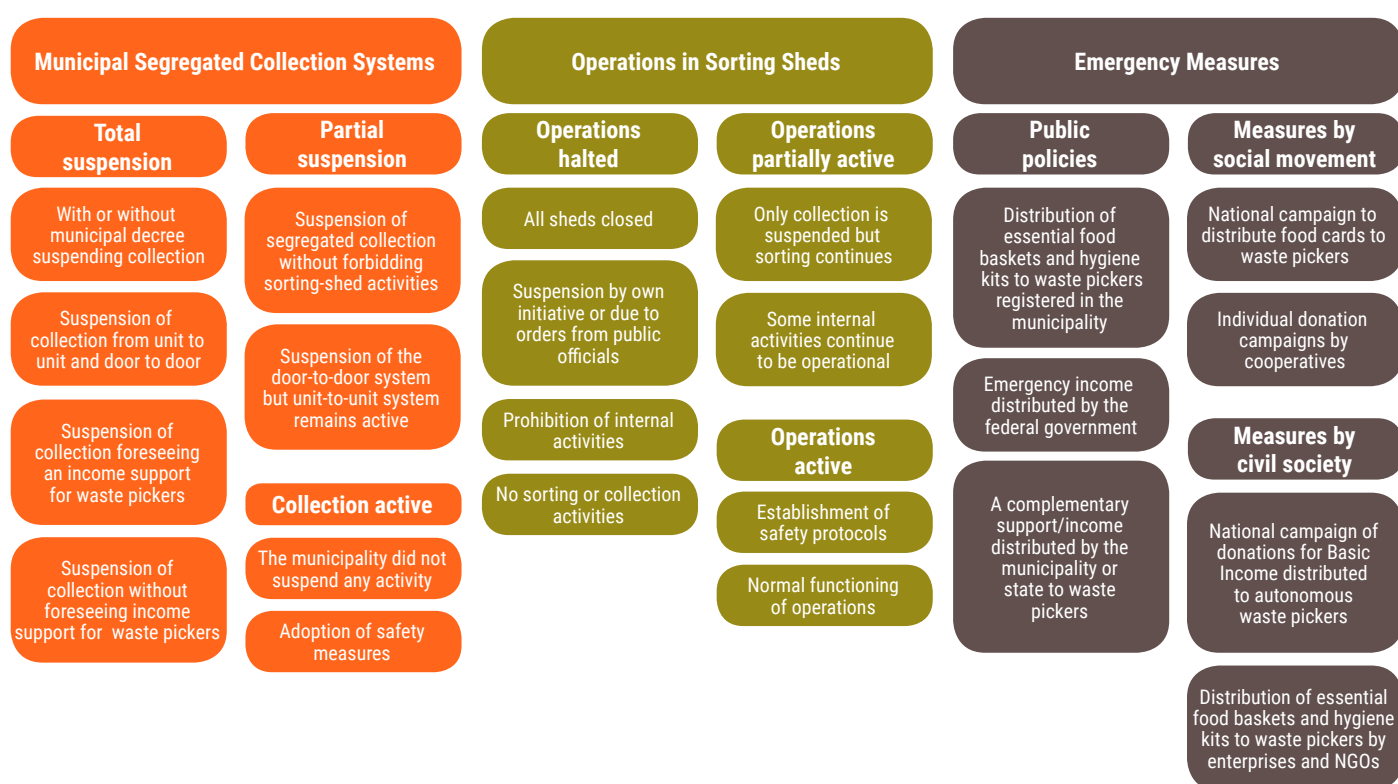
### Measures by civil society and private sector

Some other measures to support collectors of recyclable materials originated in organized civil society, NGOs and the private sector. Some of the general measures focused on food baskets, hygiene kits and PPEs for waste pickers as individuals and in cooperatives.

We highlight the campaign *Renda Mínima aos Catadores* (Basic Income to Waste Pickers) as a measure supporting waste pickers, particularly as individuals. It was promoted by the NGO *Pimp My Carroça* and supported by big brands, artists and celebrities working in different areas. The goal of the campaign was to fundraise through direct donations, which were converted to basic income for registered waste pickers in the app Cataki.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 6 summarizes trends related to inclusive recycling in Brazil in response to COVID-19.

**Figure 6: COVID-19: Trends in inclusive recycling**



## Detailed analysis: tracking of key cities

### Belo Horizonte (South-East)

Located in the South East region, Belo Horizonte is the capital of the state of Minas Gerais. The municipality is the sixth most populous in Brazil with more than 2.5 million inhabitants. Belo Horizonte decreed the closure of non-essential commerce on March 20, before any COVID-19-related deaths had been recorded and the number of confirmed cases was low (38 cases). In its early and rigid measures to contain the spread of the virus, the suspension of segregated collection was made official on March 23 in both modalities: door to door (which served 15 per cent of the population) and unit to unit (with 68 containers spread across the city). The system of segregated collection in Belo Horizonte integrates six organizations of waste pickers hired as service providers who had all their activities suspended.

<sup>10</sup> For more resources, see the promotional video by the union of cooperatives of the Sao Paulo metropolitan area: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gFz3KkUomg&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8gFz3KkUomg&feature=emb_title)

<sup>11</sup> To see the campaign of collaborative fundraising: [https://www.catarse.me/renda\\_minima\\_catadores](https://www.catarse.me/renda_minima_catadores)

Fifteen days after the interruption of segregated collection in the city, the *Fórum Municipal Lixo e Cidadania* (a network of participatory governance that includes representatives of cooperatives, NGOs and from the municipality)<sup>12</sup> created two working groups to follow the emergency support initiatives and create safety protocols, which would eventually allow segregated collection to resume.

From April 11, waste pickers registered with Belo Horizonte's cooperatives started receiving essential food baskets through the municipality's programme of social assistance, which also issued the contract payment for March.

However, the service provision contract between the municipal government and the cooperatives did not legally allow any payment alternatives to waste pickers beyond March, because there was no clause referring to extreme situations such as COVID-19. The Observatory for Inclusive and Solidary Recycling,<sup>13</sup> headquartered in Belo Horizonte, contributed to the work of the Municipal Forum by developing the *Operational Manual – The activities of waste pickers and segregated collection during and after the COVID-19 pandemic*, which will be the basis of resuming cooperatives' operations as safely as possible. This manual is currently being analyzed by the municipality's crisis committee.

*“We get that it is important to stop, we halted because we do not know what could happen, we are afraid, but we also need assurances, most people in the cooperative today are members of at-risk groups...we need help to stop activities, we do not know for how long or what can happen...we need to act under uncertainties and that's hard”* (Ivaneide Silva in the virtual meeting of the *Fórum Lixo e Cidadania*, Belo Horizonte, March 30, 2020).

### **Manaus (North)**

Manaus is a municipality in the state of Amazonas in the northern region of Brazil. The city is the financial centre of the region with over 2,1 million residents and is at the heart of the world's largest tropical forest.

The municipality attracted attention due to the pace of contagion of COVID-19. The first death from the virus was recorded on March 24. The previous day the governor of the state had declared a state of catastrophe. However, the cooperatives and associations of waste pickers had started the halting of their activities in the sorting sheds on March 13; an independent measure to protect these groups. Among the measures put in place on March 23 were the closure of non-essential commerce and the temporary suspension of segregated collection, which had been provided to 12 neighbourhoods in Manaus. The municipality watched as the number of COVID-19-related deaths increased each day. To promote self-isolation, the state government announced an emergency support for waste pickers and other informal workers of BRL200 for two months. The Public Ministry of Labour also distributed essential food baskets to waste pickers in the state, which included all groups of workers. It is not yet known when and how the segregated collection will resume, especially taking into consideration the lack of protective equipment for waste pickers.

*“The suspension of waste collection had a direct impact on wages, we cannot work and we don't have financial support for bills, we end up stopping everything and not knowing how to manage our income, put food on the table...”* – Irineide Lima MNCR/AM (speech on May 23, 2020, via YouTube).

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<sup>12</sup> For more information, see Sonia Dias (2011), *The Municipal Waste and Citizenship Forum: A Platform for Social Inclusion and Participation*, available at: <https://www.wiego.org/publications/municipal-waste-and-citizenship-forum-platform-social-inclusion-and-participation>

<sup>13</sup> Network of social partners including representatives from MNCR, local NGOs (INSEA, Sustentar etc), international NGOs (WIEGO) and universities (UFMG, UNICAMP).

### **Porto Alegre (South)**

Porto Alegre is the capital of Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil's South. With 1,5 million residents, it has 26 organizations of waste pickers and was one of the first municipalities in the country to implement a system of segregated collection. Porto Alegre was considered a model city in the battle against COVID-19 and the comparatively swift lowering in numbers of new cases and deaths indicates the success of the measures it implemented. These measures took into account several factors, including the progress of the virus and the capacity of the health system to accommodate demand. The municipality did not suspend segregated collection and the cooperatives did not stop their activities. However, the cooperatives experienced a reduction in the amount of material arriving in the sorting sheds and a lack of protection equipment and, as a result, a reduction in income. The contracts that the municipality signed with the cooperatives and associations of waste pickers for service provision were not in force before the pandemic, which added to the waste pickers' burdens.

### **Fortaleza (North-East)**

Fortaleza is the capital of the state of Ceará in Brazil's North-East and draws much tourism with its beaches and natural beauty. Its population is about 2,6 million. The municipality watched as COVID-19 cases rose and closed commercial activities on March 19. That measure had a direct impact on recycling and waste pickers therefore suspended their activities not only due to the risk of contagion, but also because of a lack of materials and a significant reduction in their market value. After the municipality recommended that associations and cooperatives follow safety procedures to resume activities, segregated collection partially started up again. The *Movimento Supera Fortaleza* was organized to support informal workers through donations of food and hygiene items. The *Movimento* includes initiatives from the municipality and the state, as well as individuals, the private sector and NGOs. With the goal of reducing the impact of the suspension of the activities of waste pickers, who are recognized as informal workers, the municipality of Fortaleza – through the *Movimento* – provided 265 essential food baskets to waste pickers from 12 associations in the municipality.

*“We are like a family that depends on recycling. But today we know we have to stay home. We ask God not to put any waste picker in danger and we pray that everyone takes care of themselves”* – Sebastiana do Carmo, Ascajan (May 10, 2020, interview with Diário do Nordeste).

### **Brasília (Centre-West)**

Capital of Brazil and located in the Centre-West region where it hosts the federal government headquarters, Brasília has a population of around 3 million people. Brasília began the quarantine by closing non-essential commerce on March 19. Two days later, the federal government suspended segregated collection and closed sorting sheds. It also promised emergency financial support for affected waste pickers.

In April and May, more than 1,200 waste pickers had access to the state-provided catastrophe subsidy of BRL408. The subsidy, in terms of the Organic Law of Social Assistance, is given to families that are vulnerable due to adverse situations. It is distributed in cases of disaster or public catastrophe declared by the federal government. On May 30, the government of the Federal District authorized the planning of restarting segregated waste collection through the presentation of safety plans to avoid infections. The plans will be analyzed by the State Under-Secretariat of Health Monitoring of the federal district and approved by the SLU.

*“Cooperatives of waste pickers of the Federal District are vulnerable due to the pandemic, they are in debt and the members are fearful of resuming activities of collection and sorting, risking contagion through the residues or through commuting, but they do not find any alternatives, because of the slowness and bureaucracy of the public machinery when it comes to social assistance for emergency measures of basic income, due to the suspension of the only source of income, leads to feelings of humiliation, indignation and despair. Resuming selective collection with the required protection of waste pickers...with the support of ANVISA and SLU in accordance with the norms established by the World Health Organization – WHO,*

*and the implementation of a continuous educational communication plan...these are the only alternatives we have now to normalize the economic situation of collectors and the environmental situation...” – Aline Sousa, president of CENTCOOP.*

## **Conclusion – Part 1**

During pandemics, regular collection services become increasingly necessary. However, despite the importance of recycling in maintaining the production chain and the significant contribution of waste pickers to that value chain, the municipal programmes of segregated collection were not considered to be an essential service in most Brazilian cities, nor were waste pickers valued as essential workers.

As discussed above, many municipalities suspended segregated collecting as a precautionary measure. Waste pickers are more susceptible to being infected with COVID-19 due to the nature of their work and, in particular, the lack of hygiene and individual and collective protection protocols, unsanitary workplaces and/or sorting sheds with inadequate infrastructure.

The issues of food security and basic income presented as immediate demands. We can see how the actions of government, civil society and other enterprises complemented one another. Despite the importance of cooperation between sectors, this crisis also highlights the need for state action in inclusive segregated collection and indicates the need to improve contracts regulating service provision between cooperatives and municipalities. These contracts should have additional clauses relating to payment for services in cases of suspension of segregated collection due to orders from sanitation authorities. It is also necessary to consider that, in places where registers of waste pickers were more consolidated, emergency actions were implemented faster compared to municipalities that did not register waste pickers, either in cooperatives or as individuals.

## **Part 2 – Survey: COVID-19 situation of cooperatives of recyclable-material waste pickers in Brazil**

### **Survey methodology**

The database of cooperatives of waste pickers of recyclable materials presented in this study 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.

The questionnaires were distributed by staff of institutions that provide technical consulting services to cooperatives of waste pickers through the DAMF, or were answered directly by cooperatives.

These organizations supporting cooperatives can be NGOs or consulting firms with environmental expertise that focus on management of solid waste and participation of waste-picker cooperatives. DAMF hires them to assist the cooperatives and promote their technical progress, particularly in



administrative and financial management, production processes and trade in materials. Therefore, these institutions have links with cooperatives that last at least a year and many have been providing support for more than five years. The consistency of this relationship assures the reliability of the data presented.

In total, 15 institutions of technical consulting and about 50 professionals were involved in this process. The online forms were sent through e-mail, along with instructions about their application. Questions were resolved throughout data collection by the study coordinator.

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

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.

The first questionnaire was distributed in two different periods, between March 30 and April 6, and then between April 27 and May 6. The other two questionnaires were only distributed once. The questionnaire about the market value of materials was distributed between April 23 and April 27, and the one regarding health conditions was distributed between May 12 and May 18. The question regarding the functioning of cooperatives during the COVID-19 crisis (normal functioning, partial functioning or closed operations) was repeated in the first and third questionnaires, which allowed for three different periods of data comparison.

Participants in the cooperatives that responded to the different surveys comprised: 1) 140 responses: Functioning of cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19; 2) 124 responses: Survey on the market value of recyclable materials from the perspective of cooperatives of waste pickers during COVID-19; 3) 127 responses: Survey on the health situation of waste pickers during COVID-19.

## **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.

On March 20, the Brazilian Association of Sanitary and Environmental Engineering (ABES) issued a specific guidance for this sector, in which it clarified the following:

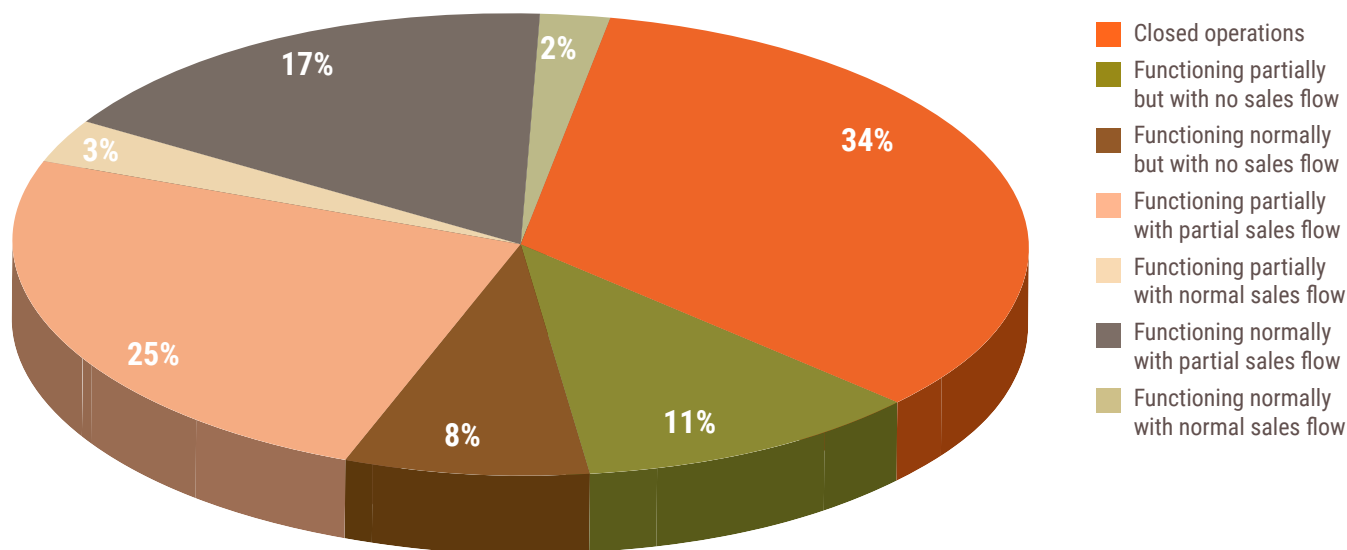
2.2 What should stop: The services of selective collection, transportation and handling in the Facilities of Residues Recovery are unfeasible during this period, due to the risks they present, and should be stopped. The collectors of recyclable materials should be compensated through a temporary social support, to be instituted by local governments (ABES, March, 2020).

In the face of this situation, the goal of the first survey was to present the functioning status of cooperatives of waste pickers as well as mapping, among the partially or fully functioning cooperatives, how they were receiving the recyclable materials and where these were being sent to, given that selective collection was suspended. It also looked at what kind of support waste pickers could access to mitigate the impacts of the crisis.

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

The first survey was conducted between March 30 and April 6, 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 7 shows the different categorizations related to partial suspensions.

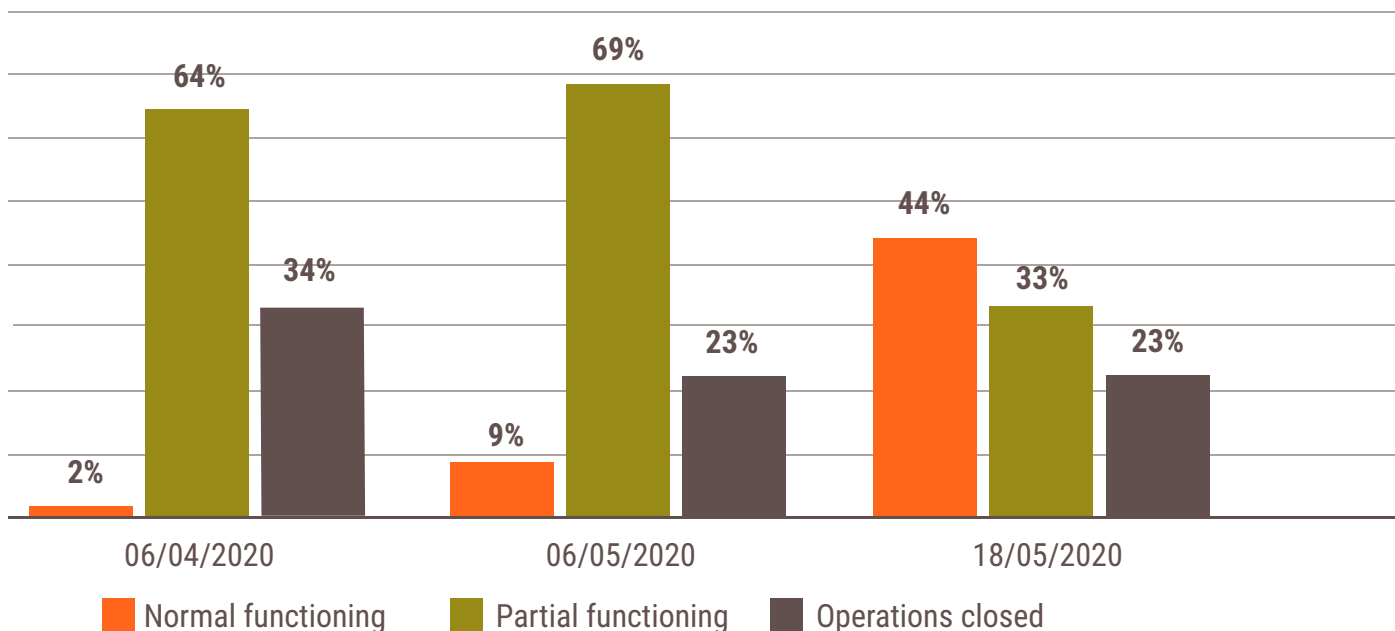
**Figure 7: Operation of cooperatives that participate in DAMF during COVID-19**



Source: DAMF, 2020

In Figure 8, we can follow the evolution on the functioning status of cooperatives in three different periods from the beginning of social distancing and quarantine measures.

**Figure 8: Functioning of cooperatives during COVID-19**



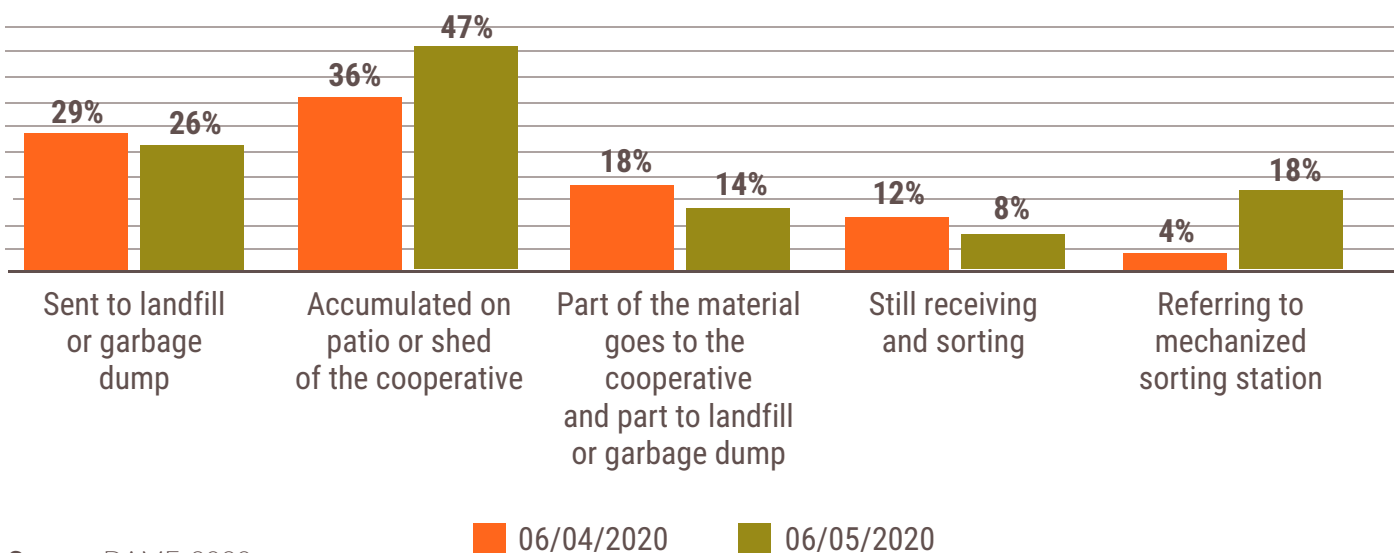
Source: DAMF, 2020.

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 was obtained:

**Figure 9: Destinations of materials in cases of cooperatives closed or partially functioning**



Source: DAMF, 2020.

Two key findings are shown in this graphic. 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, 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.

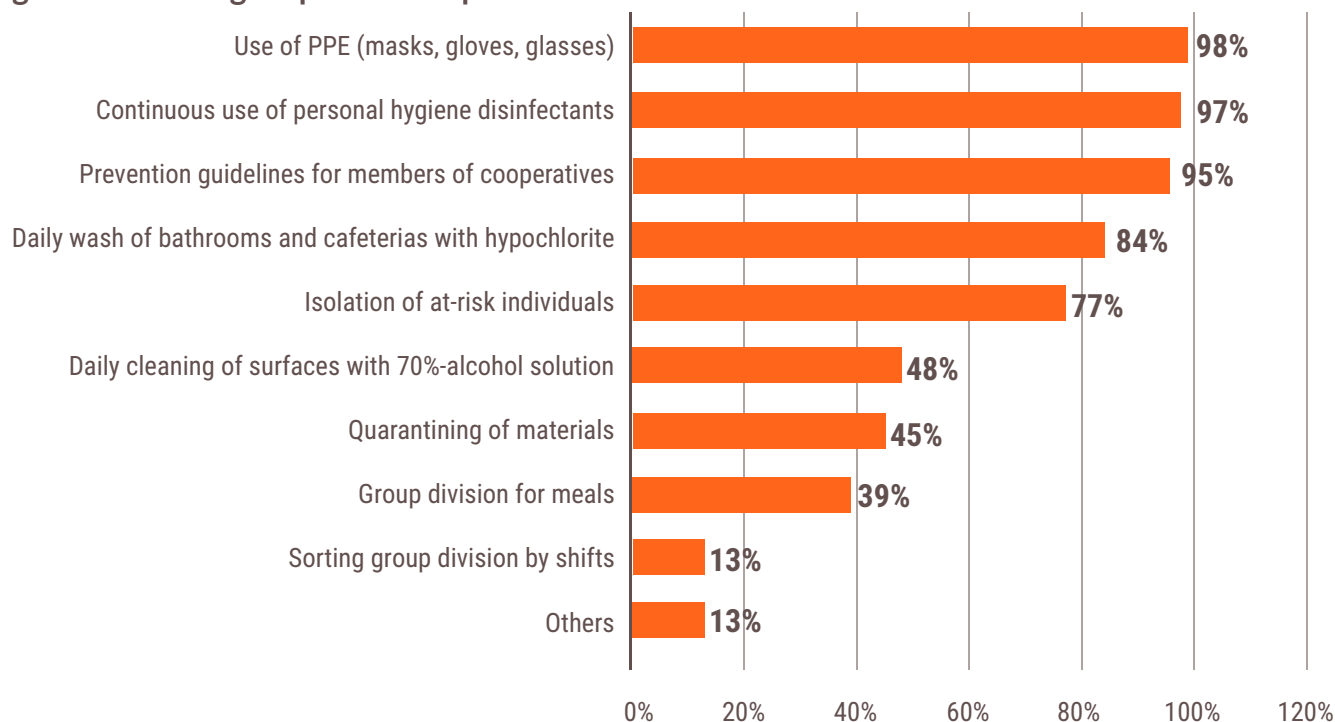
Another important finding is the growing amount of material sent to mechanized stations. The city of Sao Paulo is the only municipality in this study with two mechanized stations for storing materials from segregated collection. These stations receive materials from municipal segregated collection and the sorting is done through automatized and manual methods, operated by cooperatives of waste pickers also responsible for quality control. With the closure of operations due to the municipality-decreed quarantine, the segregated collection still in place sent materials to these stations.

### **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 such as the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and social distancing practices including separating workers from at-risk groups and dividing groups during meals. These and other measures are shown in Figure 10.

**Figure 10: Contagion prevention protocols**



Source: Authors, 2020.

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).

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).

Regarding the use of PPEs, the cooperatives state that while the most used equipment is still gloves (88 per cent), there is now also generalized use of masks (85 per cent)<sup>14</sup>. Those not using this kind of equipment (12 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively) state that it is because they do not have the financial resources to buy them, or difficulties finding them with the heightened demand.

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

**Figure 11: COVID-19 cases**



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

<sup>14</sup> Here the exact question was about which PPEs required to prevent contagion were not being used by the cooperative. However, we understood that it would be more accessible to ask what equipment was being used for prevention protocols. Therefore, it was reported that 12 per cent of cooperatives were not using gloves and 15 per cent were not using masks.

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>15</sup>

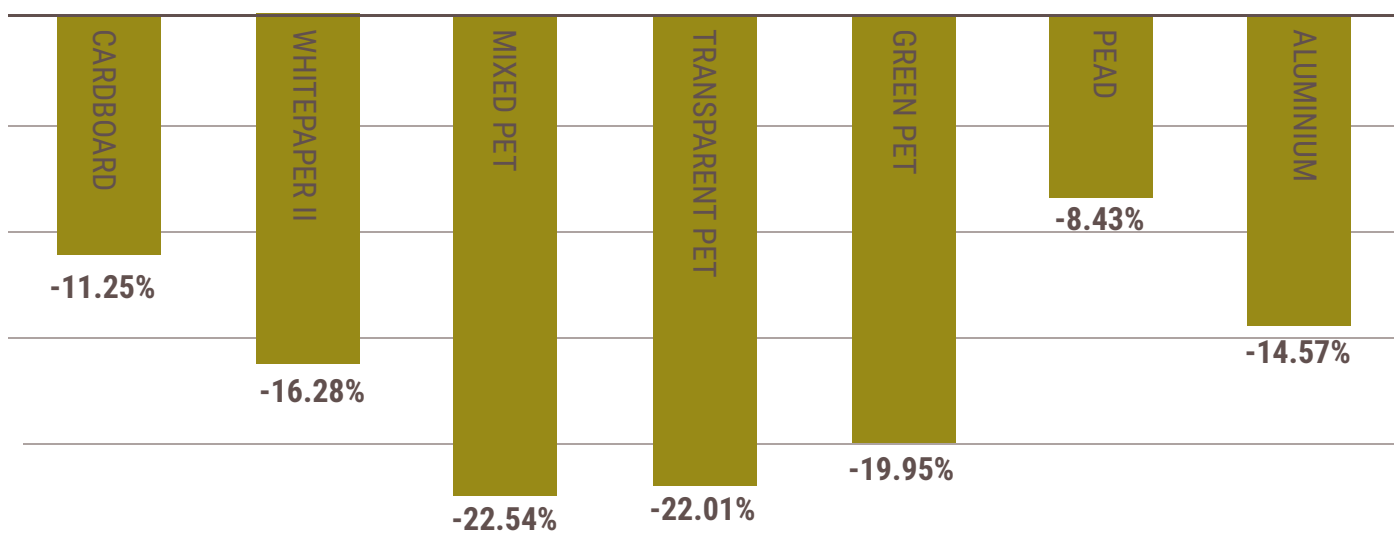
It is worth noting that, where cooperatives were shut down, there could have been more suspected cases than were notified. Suspected cases were registered in 15 municipalities. Londrina in Paraná state had most, with 16 suspected cases and none confirmed by testing. The municipality of Belém (Pará) had 10 suspected cases and also none confirmed. Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul) had six suspected cases among members of cooperatives participating in the DAMF.

### **Economic impacts and subsistence strategies of waste pickers during the pandemic**

Health systems and the economy were significantly impacted by the pandemic. With the health of the population at risk, the preservation of lives must come before economic concerns. With the need to close non-essential services and commerce to preserve life, the economic impacts have to be absorbed. In this context, the most fragile economic groups are the most affected, unless there is a financial and economic support plan. With operations shut down or compromised and the struggle to sell materials, the members of cooperatives suddenly lost their monthly income.

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 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 12:

**Figure 12: Comparing decreased percentiles in market value per type of material.**

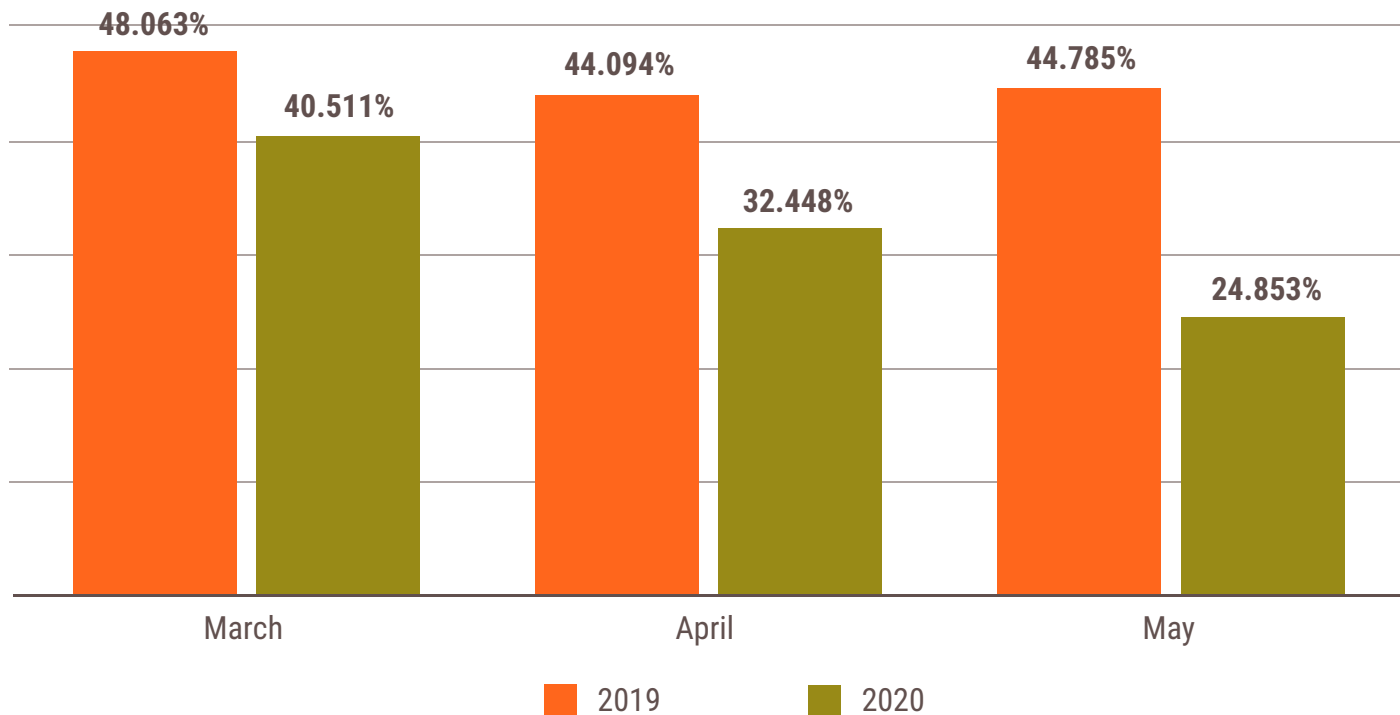


Source: DAMF, 2020.

Compared to the same period in 2019 (March, April and May) we can see a decrease in gross revenue of 44.5 per cent in May. With the resuming of normal operations in May by the cooperatives, there was a significant increase. The fall in revenue, even with the increase and normalization of operations, indicates that the impacts on these activities might persist and be related to the trade in recycling materials and not only to the return of normal operations.

<sup>15</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.

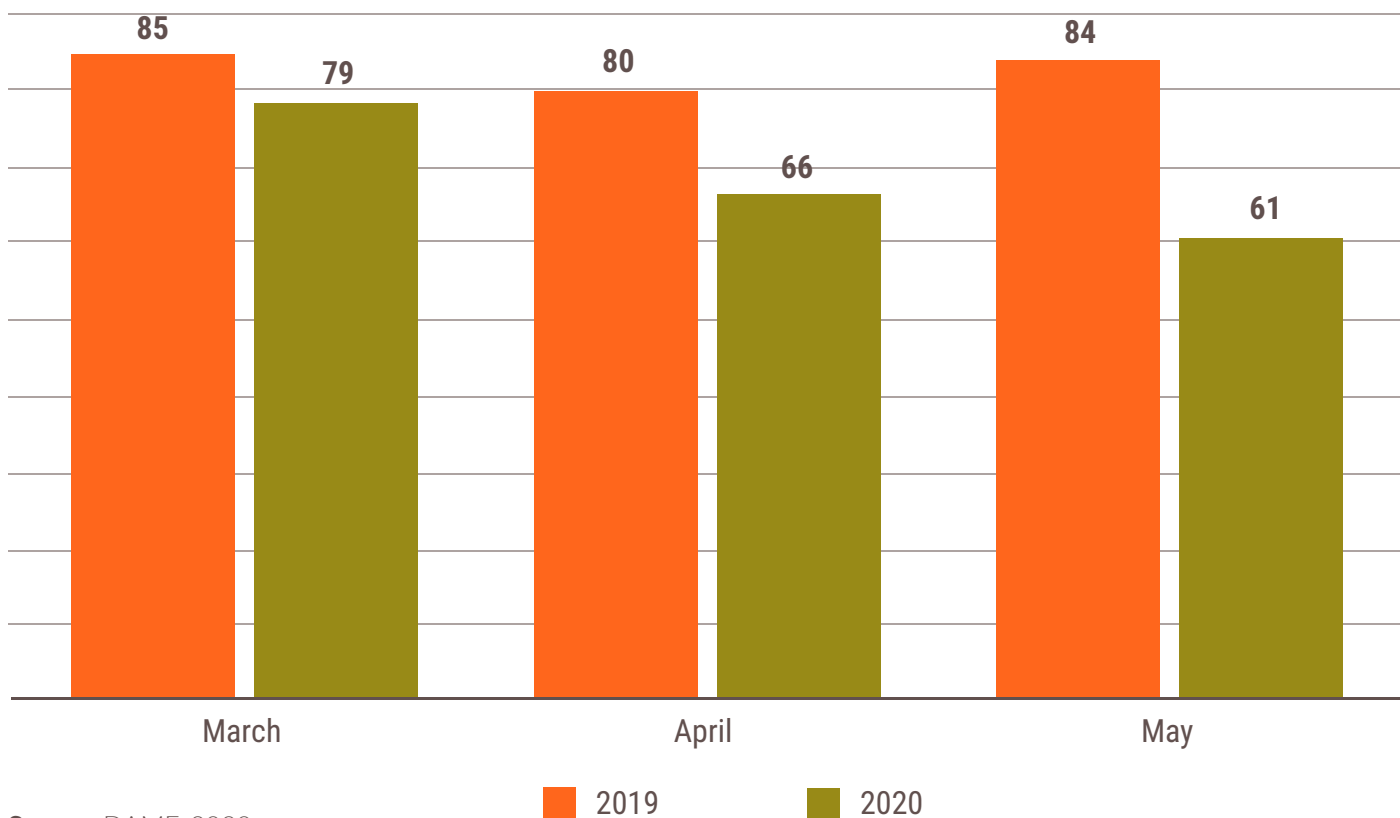
Figure 13: Average gross revenues (BRL/month).



Source: DAMF, 2020.

We can see, for example, that the production index does not follow the same decrease in revenue of cooperatives. As the revenue falls 44.5 per cent compared to May of the previous year, the fall in production is 27.4 per cent, which reinforces the need to follow the performance of the market, and not only the performance of waste picking and sorting operations.

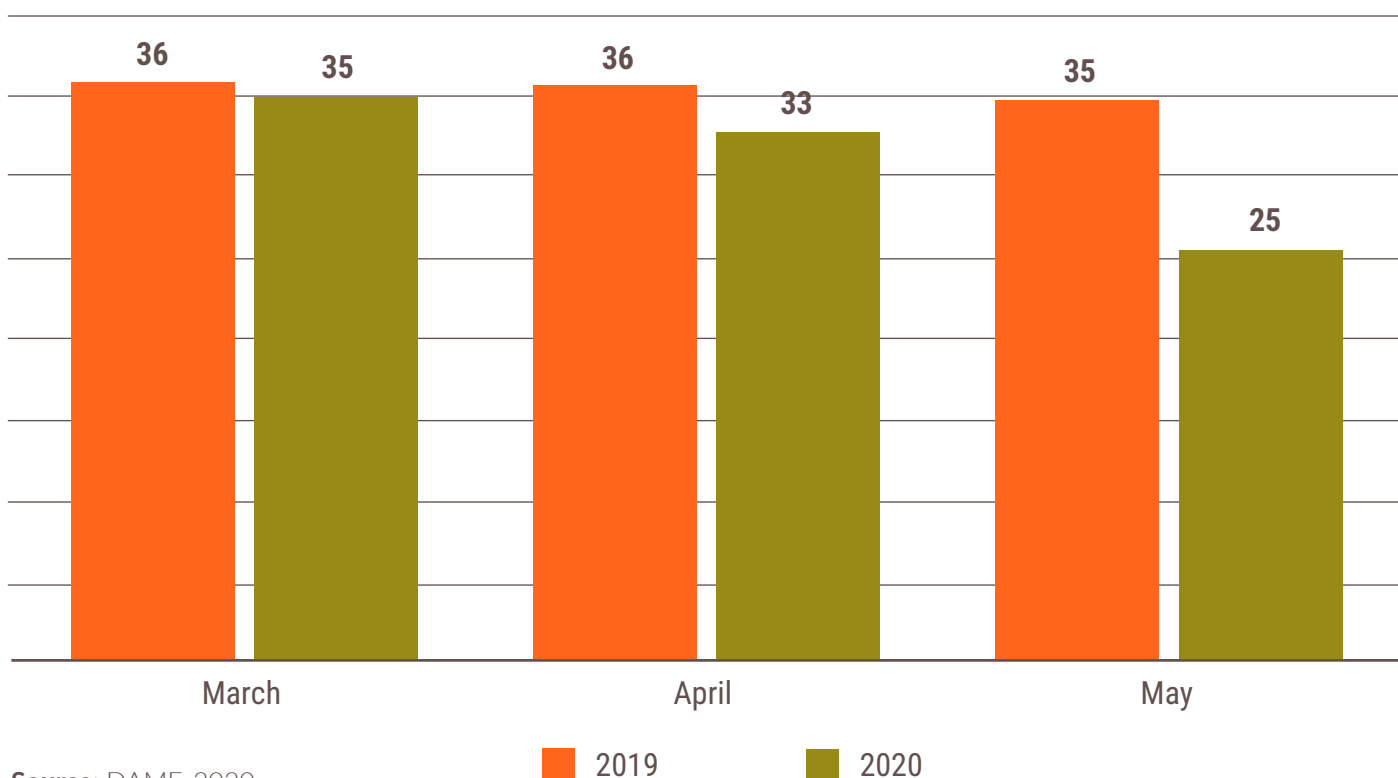
Figure 14: Average production (ton/month).



Source: DAMF, 2020.

Another alarming fact is the decrease in the number of waste pickers in cooperatives, when compared with May 2019 (a decrease of 28.6 per cent). This decrease, which is only seen in the last month of comparison, is not conclusive but shows that close monitoring of the situation is required.

**Figure 15: Monthly average of waste pickers per cooperative.**



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 in the 2008 economic crisis.

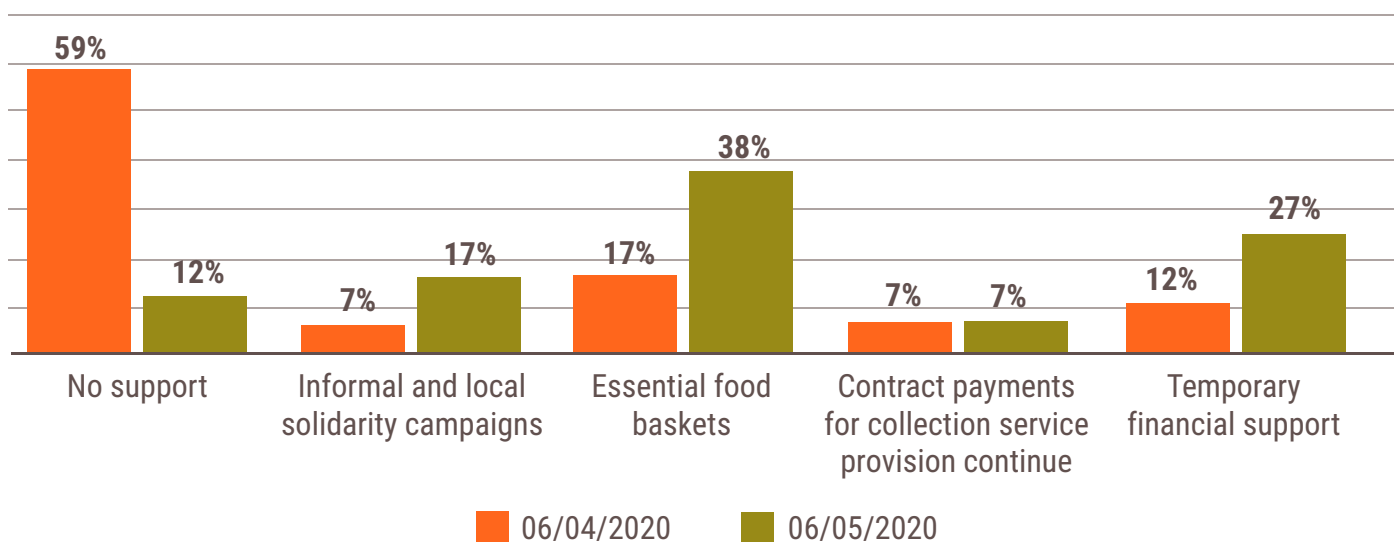
With the decline in the value of recyclable materials in the commodities market and reduced consumer spending, the cooperatives – due to their financial fragility – are held captive by low market prices because they need to sell materials at whatever price is offered (Souza, 2013). During the 2008 economic crisis, the low prices for materials resulted in waste pickers defecting to other informal markets. Cooperatives experienced a significant decline in productivity and sustainability 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 on trucks 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 make zero profits.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Available at: <https://www.nsctotal.com.br/noticias/coronavirus-novo-decreto-do-governo-de-sc-fecha-divisas-do-estado-e-proibe-agrupamentos-em>.

To cope with this situation, cooperatives have begun mobilizing various support systems, such as those shown in Figure 16.

**Figure 16: Type of support provided to waste pickers during COVID-19.**



Source: DAMF, 2020.

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 spend on rent, medicine, etc.

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* (Brazil's version of a social security number registry) 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:



**Figure 17: Information from cooperatives on domestic violence**



It is worth noting that the information was collected through the statements of heads of cooperatives and many may not have been aware of all 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 relies on the perceptions of the heads of cooperatives. Therefore, a more rigorous analysis would be required before inferences could be made regarding mental disturbances caused by the pandemic. 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, the required self-isolation, 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, 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 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.

## Conclusion – Part 2

The data presented and analyzed in the second part of this study, 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 could be the main factor related to the low incidence of COVID-19 among waste pickers who are members of the cooperatives analyzed – but a longer and more thorough monitoring is required, given that the numbers presented were stated by the heads of cooperatives, which presents the risk of under-reporting.

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 the cooperatives, because these impacts are dependent on a variety of externalities, such as the commodities market and restrictions on the operations of buyers and recyclers during the pandemic. This analysis variable also calls for continued monitoring of the situation, to evaluate the extent and intensity of the impacts described during and after the crisis period of the pandemic.

In the 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 and more detailed studies are needed.

## Concluding remarks and recommendations

The COVID-19 crisis had multiple effects on the sector of solid waste across the world – suspended services of segregated collection of recyclables, unit by unit and door to door, closure of parts of the sanitation sector in some countries, among others.<sup>17</sup> The essential nature of urban cleaning services means that waste collection, particularly domestic waste, should be provided at all times because it has a crucial role in ensuring public health.

There has been much debate about whether or not segregated collection services are essential. Even if that service is not critical when it comes to collecting domestic waste, we must take into consideration the role of recyclable materials in the packaging industry. Yet, as we have argued extensively in this study, and in accordance with most technical notes of the sector, there is no way to minimize the risks of COVID-19 contamination for waste collectors due to their heightened fragility regarding safety protocols and precarious working conditions.

We saw in part 1 of this study that the first period of the crisis ignited several initiatives regarding distribution of essential food baskets (important for food security), hygiene kits and PPEs, approval of national basic income and, in some states, the approval of emergency support to complement the national basic income. We also saw the difficulties in accessing the national basic income.

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<sup>17</sup> A good overview of changes in the sector in the United States, for example, can be found at [www.wastedive.com](http://www.wastedive.com) where the closure of several communal recycling programmes is registered.

The measures of basic income and food security are extremely important and should not be viewed as charity but rather as measures of social protection. They should be seen as a right of the workers as part of the “social contract”.

The emergency measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that relate to waste pickers of recyclable materials were implemented in the short-term, but should also be considered for the long-term. The public policies started the trend for immediate social assistance for food security.

In some municipalities, as well as the distribution of essential food baskets, there was also distribution of cleaning kits and PPEs. However, the number of initiatives related to subsidies or emergency basic income was not relevant in that first period. It is essential to consider funds for cooperatives and associations to cover fixed expenses, because these costs could otherwise compromise the operations of waste picker groups in sorting sheds.

Waste pickers, and other groups of vulnerable workers, need access to measures that can protect them and mitigate the impacts of economic and health crises. We know through the WIEGO monitoring research (WIEGO, 2009) regarding the impacts of the 2008 economic crisis on informal workers in several countries that emergency support measures, such as essential food baskets and food vouchers, are very important. However, measures such as emergency basic income, creating specific support plans for each occupational group in the informal economy (waste pickers, street vendors, domestic workers, etc.) are crucial because informal workers are unable to absorb shocks in economic or health crises. Therefore, it is extremely important to have rapid implementation of mitigating actions.

We know that crises exacerbate existing injustices and inequalities. Therefore, although all crises should result in an array of mitigating actions, it is necessary for relevant actors, whether governmental or from civil society, to seize the opportunity for more substantive transformation, so that the post-crisis scenario involves a qualitative leap and not a return to the previous situation.

Therefore, this crisis raises important questions and inspires us to overcome the concept of resilience which, at its core, proclaims a return to the previous state – bouncing backwards – when instead we should ask to go beyond – bounce forward – by creating responses that transform the situation of waste pickers. These responses should incorporate, once and for all, decent work (infrastructure, contracts with fair payments for collection, sorting and processing services, and with clauses for contingency situations), equality, gender equity and work safety.

Part 2 of this report highlights the role of cooperatives in adopting personal and collective safety measures. This is in accordance with the monitoring led by WIEGO and the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers ([Globalrec](#)) in several countries. Cooperatives are presented as a space for mutual solidarity, offering options to those who have difficulty accessing emergency support, and as vessels for the dissemination and adoption of safety measures. We know through the literature that waste pickers have strong personal bonds with their occupation. Therefore, distancing from work causes disturbances and aggravates mental health conditions, which requires public policies or coordinated social actions to identify and treat the most serious cases.

Through the practical experience of the authors, it was possible to identify which municipalities had a registry of waste pickers and systematized information, whether concerning waste pickers working in cooperatives or as individuals, making it easier to implement emergency actions. Generally, the registry in the *Cadastro Único* (a social security system) was useful in the COVID-19 crisis.

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 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 collated and become the basis for the design of policies of support, ensuring that the impacts of the pandemic are minimized. These policies must guarantee the survival of this productive sector and allow it to continue to leverage the indices of national recycling by presenting a model of inclusive recycling with positive results of sustainability in the social, economic and environmental dimensions.

This overview attempted to establish a baseline to identify rapid changes and impacts of the pandemic for inclusive recycling. We do not claim to have exhausted all research possibilities. Future surveys might explore the following:

- A more profound study on the impacts of COVID-19 on the recycling value chain. How did the suspension of municipal segregated collection and of the functioning of waste picker cooperatives affect the recycling industries and the chains of food supply?
- How and to what extent were the safety protocols implemented by cooperatives that participated in the study effective in containing the virus?
- In which ways could the emergency support actions continue and are they capable of ensuring some degree of sustainability? In other words, how resilient are the cooperatives?

### **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. In workplaces and public stations, access to water sources, masks, soap, alcohol-based sanitizers, gloves, uniforms and boots must be provided.
- 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 committing 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>18</sup> in its operational manual (ORIS, 2020:02) explains the relevance to design responses for the pandemic that go beyond the:

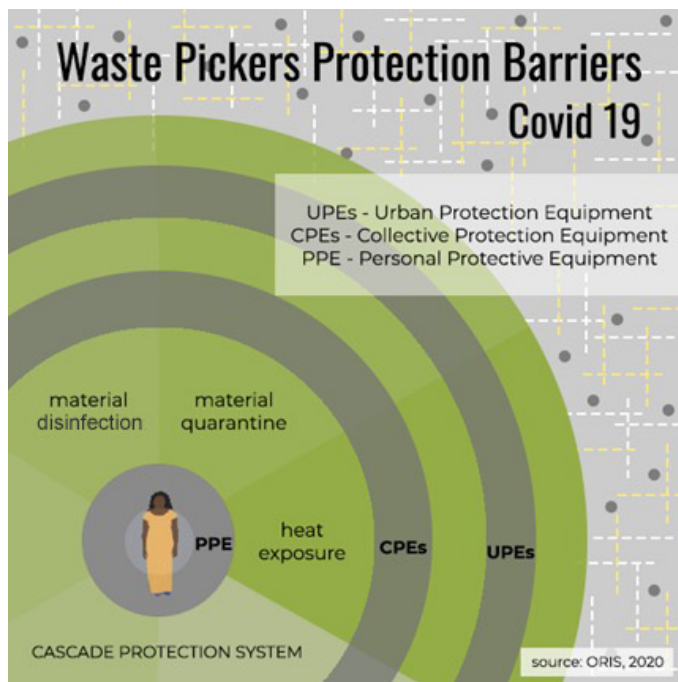
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<sup>18</sup> ORIS is a network of organizations of waste pickers, their cooperatives and the MNCR, universities (UFMG, UNICAMP) and NGOs (INSEA, Sustentar, WIEGO).

**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.

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>19</sup>

**Figure 18: 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 – we need to bounce forward not backwards. We need policies that transform, not just remedial ones!

<sup>19</sup> See ORIS, 2020

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## Tips for clean hands:

Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. You should clean all parts of your hands and fists.



## Always wash your hands:

- » before starting your workday
- » during breaks
- » after removing gloves,
- » before and after meals
- » when you get home
- » after coughing or sneezing
- » after touching objects that are used a lot (banister, door handle, bus or subway handle).

**You can also use 70% alcohol to clean your hands. But remember it is not as effective as washing your hands with soap and water and may not work if your hands are too dirty or greasy.**



FINGERS INTERLACED



THUMBS

**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).