



# Waste Pickers Cooperatives: Frontliners on Climate Change Action

COOPERATIVES FOR CLIMATE ACTION  
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Sonia Dias - WIEGO

# WIEGO and the Informal Economy

**WIEGO** is a global action-research policy network. We seek to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy.

We are a network of networks, connecting membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers locally, regionally and internationally.

Informal workers are workers who lack legal and social protection, multiple occupational groups include: home-based workers, domestic workers, street vendors and waste pickers.



New global estimates state that **61% of the global workforce is informal**. In developing countries, 79% of the urban workforce is informal (ILO 2018).

***Informal workers are the majority of workers in the world today.***

# Waste pickers

- Collect, sort and/or process household or commercial/industrial waste on the street, coop recycling facilities or in open dumps. According to the ILO Green Jobs report: 20 million worldwide.
- They can be independent (non organized) or organized (coops/associations/MSEs).
- Work individually or as family unit.
- Latin America: home of strong cooperative movement – Brazil, Colombia, Argentina....



# Waste pickers as environmental agents: contributions

- **Reduction of greenhouse gases:** Diversion of materials from the waste stream, sustaining recycling industry
- **Creation of green jobs:** Waste picking provides crucial income for people and households for populations that often lack other alternatives.
- **Promotion of public health and sanitation:** Through their work, they make cities more clean, healthy and beautiful (often at the risk of their own health).
- **Subsidy to municipalities without recognition:** In many countries, waste pickers supply the only form of solid waste collection at little or no cost to municipalities.



# Waste pickers: livelihood threats and impacts

## Macro-trends

- Technological change: waste-to-energy technology, new disposal systems
- Privatization of solid waste management
- Displacement from dumpsites without consultation

## Social and political barriers

- Stigmatization and discrimination, affecting access to services
- Abuse, intimidation and harassment from intermediaries, industry, or public authorities
- Constant risks to health and safety
- Low earnings and lack of bargaining power

## Climate change

- Occupational health impacts derived from climatic and non climatic factors are a great concern for the livelihoods of informal workers. Waste pickers have been affected by dehydration, floods, heat stress both at sorting centres, dumps or in the streets. Addressing occupational and health issues should be a primary concern in climate change mitigation plans.

**The current pandemic adds an extra layer of vulnerability to waste pickers**

# Covid-19 Cooperative Mapping and Survey

- **Cooperatives mobilized early to protect their members** and adapted to new working conditions to stop the pandemic, despite the fact that they are uniquely vulnerable to the virus in sorting sheds and in the streets; They mobilized governments and civil society for covid-19 related responses.
- **Municipalities, states, the private sector, NGOs and cooperatives joined forces** in some cases and provided support to collectors. The most common form of support was food baskets, followed by emergency basic income and fundraising campaigns.
- The decline in value per kg of each type of recyclable material is more than 20%, **a huge financial blow to cooperatives of recyclable waste collectors which threatens their sustainability;**
- **40% of the cooperatives** which participated in this survey stated they were aware of **cases of mental suffering** due to the effects of the pandemic, especially stress and anxiety;
- **54% of collectors are women** and cooperatives were aware of cases of intimate partner violence during the pandemic, associated with increased alcohol and drug consumption.

Source: WIEGO mapping and survey, 2020

# Cooperatives as a pathway to dignified work and to fighting climate change

- Enhance channels for social and political dialogue
- Mitigate risky working conditions
- Facilitate contract provisions, social protection schemes
- In Brazil, cooperatives have provided a path for organizing, mobilizing and formalizing waste pickers
- Frontliners in climate change actions
- Frontliners in fighting pandemics

Contribution of waste pickers coops to waste management and to climate change actions could be increased by implementation (or expansion) of municipal segregation @ source schemes and recognition of **informal recyclers as essential services providers**. This implies supporting coops with infrastructure, collective and personal protection equipments, and capacity building.

Rethinking resilience – bounce forward not backwards

# An agenda for inclusion: policy recommendations

- Acknowledge the rights of waste pickers to work and to access waste
- Design gender responsive solid waste management systems to include waste pickers as service providers
- Any change to the way solid waste is managed—whether upgrading from dumps to controlled landfills, introducing recycling schemes or “modernizing” a system—must begin with a plan that considers the needs of the informal workers
- Create an enabling environment and support for cooperative formation
- Provide adequate infrastructure, capacity-building, social protection
- **Recognize waste pickers as essential service providers**



*Involve waste pickers as equal partners in planning and implementation of solid waste management systems.*



THANKS  
[sonia.dias@wiego.org](mailto:sonia.dias@wiego.org)