

Cooperatives Cushion Catadores Against Worst of Pandemic

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- Waste-picker cooperatives cushioned Brazil's waste pickers (known locally as *catadores*) against the worst economic impacts of the pandemic because many had access to support, including through the country's EPR system known as the reverse logistics systems.
- All surveyed cooperatives participate in reverse logistics programmes. This may have been a determining factor in the rise in positive adaptive responses in the first half of 2021, because industries have developed various programmes to support cooperatives during the pandemic.
- The cooperatives put COVID-19 protocols in place in the sorting sheds as soon as the pandemic hit Brazil early in 2020. This has helped ensure the safety of their members and has increased their credibility with local officials.
- More than three-quarters (78%) of waste pickers in this sample were vaccinated against COVID-19. The survey showed a significant increase in the number of suspected as well as confirmed cases compared to the 2020 poll.
- Ways of coping with the crisis include building capacity among waste pickers on COVID-19 prevention measures, fundraising campaigns to strengthen waste pickers' work and technical assistance for the operation of *catador* cooperatives.

WIEGO's Surveys

In early 2020, WIEGO focused on identifying how cooperatives of waste pickers in Brazil were affected by COVID-19. In a 2021 follow-up, data was collected from *catador* cooperatives that take part in a reverse logistics programme whereby industries that produce and generate packaging are required by law to invest in the return flows of these post-consumption materials and to prioritize the participation of *catadores* in this process.

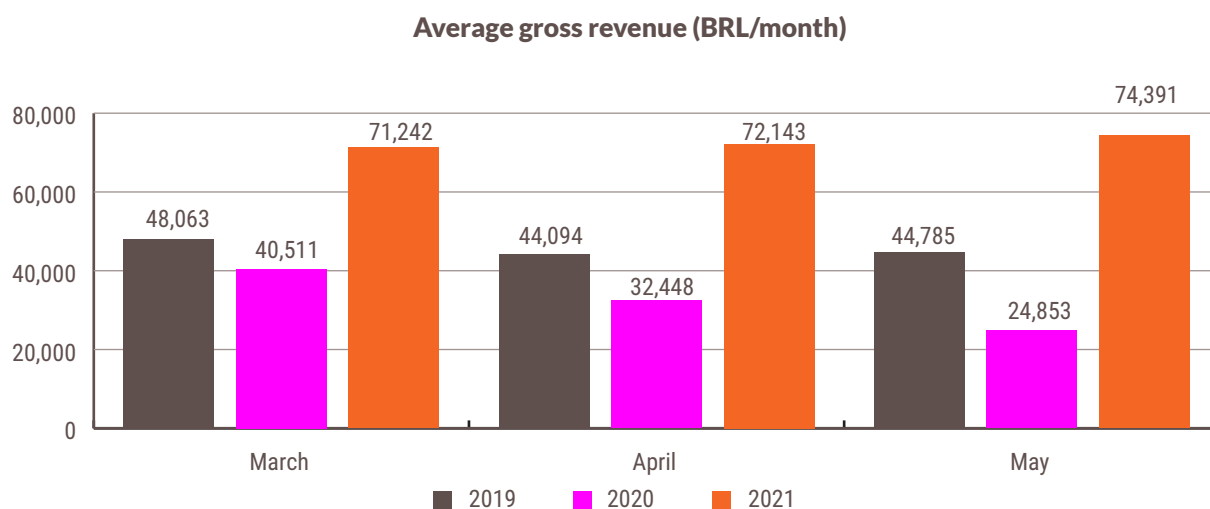
In April 2020, 77% of surveyed *catador* enterprises were ensuring that people at most risk of contracting COVID-19 stayed home, but in 2021 only 49% were adhering to this protocol. This big



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

drop may be due to changes in safety protocols in 2021, or vaccine distribution with at-risk populations given priority. Also, the 2021 survey showed significant improvements in access to Brazil's public health-care system *Serviço Único de Saúde* (Unified Health Service), with 594 people receiving treatment for COVID-19, compared to only four in the 2020 poll.

On the economic front, the 2021 survey showed a huge increase in the gross revenue of projects compared with the same months in 2019 and 2020. Taking 2019 as a reference year for a normal recyclables market, the graph shows the pandemic's significant negative impact on cooperatives in 2020, but also the surprisingly positive recovery observed in 2021.



The rise in material values is due to the growing demand for disposable packaging. However, the data also showed a slight drop in cooperatives' productivity in 2021. Because cooperatives' revenue primarily depends on the volume of materials they collect, the negative impact of the pandemic may drag on, with cooperatives facing long-term difficulties with few options for diversifying revenues, limited coverage of selective collection due to few materials available on the street, and disputes with autonomous *catadores*.

With the pandemic-related economic crisis, many people began collecting recyclable materials to earn or supplement income, attracted by the raised prices of recyclable materials. 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).

Cooperatives may be walking a tightrope due to market anomalies, lack of remuneration contracts, and suspension of selective collection systems. It is essential that governments and institutions design policies that invest in structuring the cooperative sector so that these enterprises 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*.

We believe it is necessary to take advantage of the recognition of cooperatives as essential service providers for municipalities. *Catadores* still face significant socioeconomic fragility and support strategies continue to be necessary.