

# Social and Solidarity Economy Practices of the Planeta Verde Cooperative of Waste Pickers

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## Key Points

- 1 Planeta Verde cooperative, in the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia's Antioquia region, and similar associations in Colombia champion the rights of waste pickers and their recognition as essential service providers in municipalities around the country.
- 2 This case study of Planeta Verde identifies the social and solidarity economy practices that are incorporated into the cooperative members' daily recycling work.
- 3 Social solidarity actions include communal lunches, community savings, protection of older people, attention to education, and strengthening women's leadership. These practices are managed collaboratively with the aim of building effective solidarity ecosystems to overcome poverty.
- 4 Survey findings include that women fill the vast majority of Planeta Verde's governing and management roles, just over one-third of the women waste pickers' households depend solely on their waste picking work, and more than half of Planeta Verde members are 60 years and older. Younger waste pickers cover routes for those over 60 with health problems.



*Dioselina Castrillón has been a member of Planeta Verde for 20 of the 30 years she has been a waste picker. Photo credit: Planeta Verde*

<sup>1</sup> This summary is based on WIEGO Organizing Brief No. 18 by the authors.



*Geni Serna, a waste picker and victim of Colombia's armed conflict, leads several of the Planeta Verde's social and solidarity actions. Photo credit: Planeta Verde*

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) in its 2018 report, "Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture", 61% of the world's working population is in informal employment. Its estimates show that more than 20 million people worldwide make their livelihoods through waste picking. Waste picker organizations across 34 countries – including Colombia's National Waste Pickers Association, ANR – are now represented by the International Alliance of Waste Pickers, which held its first elective congress in May 2024.

For more than two decades, Planeta Verde cooperative, in the municipality of Rionegro in Colombia's Antioquia region, has brought together over 100 waste pickers, of which 40% are women and 60% are men. Associations such as Planeta Verde champion the rights of Colombia's waste pickers and their recognition as essential service providers in the provision of municipal recycling services.

The case study of Planeta Verde identifies the social and solidarity economy practices that are incorporated into – and go beyond – the daily recycling work of its members. The practices are embedded in a variety of aspects of members' lives, promoting well-being in their connection to issues including food security, education, recreation, savings and access to credit.

These actions to overcome poverty and strengthen Planeta Verde's social solidarity ecosystem are carried out collectively and collaboratively within the cooperative.

Two principles on the social and solidarity ecosystem stand out in this research. First, Planeta Verde reflects the social and solidarity economy's capacity to organize and carry out the work of recycling. Second, this alternative economy's power lies in daily practices that seek to tackle fundamental inequalities and exclusionary practices generated by capitalism.

The study is based on research including a survey conducted from May to July 2024, as part of the project, "Organizational, social and productive practices related to the social and solidarity economy in *La Cooperativa de Trabajo Asociado Planeta Verde*".

The survey found that, in Planeta Verde, 35% of the women waste pickers' households depend solely on their waste picking work.





Juan Manuel Monsalve, a member of Planeta Verde, on his recycling route. Photo credit: Planeta Verde

Almost all (95%) of the cooperative's members have at least a minimum education and are able to read and write. Of these, 60% have been members of Planeta Verde for more than 10 years. All members are recipients of the cooperative's social and solidarity actions, and 80% manage some of these actions.

In Colombia, recycling is a public service provided by waste pickers organized in associations and cooperatives. Since the 1990s, in response to the demands of waste picker groups led by the National Association of Recyclers (ANR), the Colombian Constitutional Court has issued more than seven rulings binding on the State to recognize, protect and strengthen the conditions of waste pickers, through recognition of their work, respect for their recycling routes, and providing opportunities for stabilized income and growth. The Court also urged the Colombian State to reverse the public sanitation service provision throughout the country, thereby recognizing the historical contribution to this service by waste pickers and paying them for this work.

These rights, which are recognized individually for waste pickers in Colombia, are also claimed collectively, based on the formalization of waste-picker associations nationwide that correspond to forms of organization typical of the social and solidarity economy.

The most remarkable aspect of this cooperative process is that, in addition to championing the rights of Colombia's waste pickers and their recognition as essential in the provision of the recycling public sanitation services in municipalities throughout the country, waste picker associations such as Planeta

Verde incorporate social and solidarity actions into their daily work.

The solidarity actions began in 2001, with the urgent need to support waste pickers and their families in terms of food, health, clothing and housing. Many people had entered the occupation of waste picking at that time of humanitarian emergency caused by the Colombian armed conflict and resultant displacement. These responses have evolved. Currently, Planeta Verde carries out clothing bazaars and other solidarity actions to provide for the basic needs of the waste pickers' families. It should be noted that such initiatives build and strengthen the ties of the cooperative's social base.

Also, despite the economic crises of the early years of the cooperative, efforts were made within the association to develop savings practices, with the aim of enabling, in the midst of scarcity, the fulfillment of dreams of education and access to family housing.

These practices were refined and became deeply rooted over the years, while at the same time cooperative governance practices and leadership roles in social and educational committees were strengthened.

The Planeta Verde cooperative and the social and solidarity economy model on which it is based show the gradual transformation in the areas of recognition and inclusion of waste pickers, as well as a legal framework for this.

Yet, the study shows that the cooperative continues to face threats – economically, politically and at a

Other findings include that:

- Women fill 80% of Planeta Verde's governing and management roles.
- 55% of Planeta Verde members are 60 years and older.
- 30% have significant physical and other disabilities.
- 72% have always been in informal employment, while 28% became waste pickers after being excluded from manufacturing work.
- 38% are victims of Colombia's armed conflict.
- 10% are migrants.



*A communal lunch is among Planeta Verde's social and solidarity actions. Photo credit: Planeta Verde*

structural level. Waste pickers also face daily threats through working on the streets. Pertinent here is the political advocacy that is interwoven into the social and solidarity model.

Among the threats the cooperative movement has sought to address are insecurity, the risks of being used by third parties, and competing for materials with non-formalized waste pickers and/or private companies, lack of social protections including pensions, insecure access to materials, weather conditions made more extreme by climate change, and gender-based violence.

Cooperatives have worked hard to promote gender equality and, in 2024, the vast majority of leadership and administrative positions in Planeta Verde are held by women. To achieve this, from 2004 to 2010, Planeta Verde focused on strengthening women's leadership and management skills. To boost women's economic empowerment and identify ways to combat gender-based violence, Planeta Verde made use of pedagogical materials developed by WIEGO.

Planeta Verde's partnerships are carried out in three ways: With communities, groups of non-governmental organizations or organized citizens, fellow cooperatives and others to develop joint political and social actions or to support Planeta

Verde's solidarity work; using every opportunity to defend rights and influence public policies; and with allies for activities such as training.

The cooperative's social and solidarity actions are carried out within a mixed model that incorporates the grass-roots base of the cooperative, the joint work with third parties, and the contribution of allies, families and communities in general. It is essential that the waste pickers themselves identify the types of partnerships in the development of these practices.

One of the promises of the social and solidarity economy is to search for good living and Planeta Verde's organizational and productive practices centre on this.

The study highlights both direct and complementary social and solidarity actions. These consolidate the cooperative's social and solidarity ecosystem. Among the actions are:

- Communal lunches – Once a week, waste pickers prepare lunch for the group on a voluntary basis. The food provided through Planeta Verde's alliance with the food bank is used and most waste pickers in the cooperative join after finishing their routes. The value of this practice lies in the fact that by cooking, sharing food and coming together, community bonds are reaffirmed and strengthened.
- Community savings – Planeta Verde offers a system of social and solidarity savings that allows the financial self-management of workers in informal employment who cannot access traditional banking services.





Cooperative members sort vegetables from food banks and distribute them to waste pickers' households. Photo credit: Planeta Verde

Recibiblioteca. The library includes texts on the social and solidarity economy, cooperativism, peace building and social change. Around the library is a collection of art and other educational and cultural offerings for cooperative members, their families and communities. Through cooperative surpluses, and with the support of allies, Planeta Verde annually pays towards the educational costs of members and their dependants and provides basic study kits for children at primary and secondary levels.

Using communication with political intent is important to Planeta Verde. The cooperative first used this for the recognition and inclusion of waste pickers, and then the base shifted to the recognition of waste pickers' human rights, which are protected under Colombia's Constitution.

This study reveals significant progress in the recognition and inclusion of waste pickers in Rionegro. In addition, it underscores the social and solidarity economy model as a foundation for extensive action in defending waste pickers' human rights. This ecosystem stands out for its natural inclusion of people and the implementation of actions typical to popular and solidarity economies, where alliances are key and that have decent work at the centre.

- Protection of older people – Young waste pickers cover routes for those over 60 years old who have health problems that sometimes make it difficult for them to complete their work. This practice was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Planeta Verde has also had human-powered carts since 2015 that incorporate an electric system to facilitate micro-routes for people over 65.
- Library and education – Books that waste pickers collect are repaired and used in the cooperative's educational and social space called

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### About WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is a global network focused on empowering the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy to secure their livelihoods. We believe all workers should have equal economic opportunities, rights, protection and voice. WIEGO promotes change by improving statistics and expanding knowledge on the informal economy, building networks and capacity among informal worker organizations and, jointly with the networks and organizations, influencing local, national and international policies.

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