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# Impacts of Covid-19 on organized waste pickers in selected municipalities in the State of São Paulo

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**Abstract:** This study, carried out with waste picker organizations in 32 municipalities in the State of São Paulo, seeks to analyze the impacts of the pandemic (Covid-19) on their activities, including measures taken by the government and other actors, in order to alleviate the impacts resulting from the crisis. Our theoretical framework discusses the relationships between social movements and public policies. Organized waste pickers provide selective collection services, interacting with different levels of government in situations of collaboration and conflict, with frequent collective actions seeking improvements. Bibliographic research and application of questionnaires inform about the interactions of waste pickers, showing structural and systemic problems, highlighting their demands as a social movement.

**Keywords:** Waste pickers, social movements; solid waste management; public policy; Covid-19.

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## 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil has had expressive economic impacts due to the restriction of activities to contain the contagion. Its significant impact on the formal economy has undeniably affected the informal sectors, usually made up of businesses with no cash reserve nor access to credit.

This paper investigates how waste picker organizations in selected municipalities of the State of São Paulo reacted to the crisis, adapting to maintain their operations afloat. We identified actions that included internal strategies by the groups and interactions with several players. The theoretical framework explored deals with the relationship between social movements and public policies, considering the organizations researched as members of a social movement whose most comprehensive organization is the Movimento Nacional de Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis (MNCR), which expresses their identity through symbols such as flags and catchphrases, formal and informal appointments, training practices, life and work stories, among others. Thus, we consider social movements to be organized groups that share identities and values in collective actions (ABERS; SILVA; TATAGIBA, 2018; CARLOS, 2020). The improvement of working conditions is a goal that has always been part of the history of these organizations, and it includes the proposition of public policies. In the context studied, the actions aimed to minimize the impacts of the restriction of activities in the context of a battle for alternative urban waste management policies.

The main methodology used in this work was participatory action research (KIDD & KRAL, 2005), adapted to the constraints of fieldwork during the pandemic. The interaction between the researchers and the pickers took place over the Internet, including through social networks (WhatsApp, Facebook), virtual meetings, and telephone contact. We also carried out bibliographic and documentary research to complement the data with secondary information. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the University of Victoria (protocol # 17-135).

Bellow, we present the theoretical approach, research methodology, results and their discussion, in addition to the conclusions of this study.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The issue under study was interpreted based on theories about the relationship between social movements and public policies, focusing on the actions of picker organizations in the face of the pandemic, which included proposals and actions aimed at changing public policies in the territories in which they operate.

Considering social movements as political agents and mapping their reactions to structural constraints and opportunities brought about by external shocks is key to understanding phenomena such as those analyzed herein (RADCLIFFE, 2004).

To Carlos (2020), the most widespread theories about social movements tend to

separate them from the State, dealing only superficially with the mutual constitution between these players. However, the participation of these movements in the political system through participatory institutions and State interaction participation repertoires (dialog and conflict) is evident. To Abers, Silva and Tatagiba (2018) the relationship between public policies and social movements in Brazil has generated a series of studies about the effect of public policies on social movements and about the influence of such movements on public policies.

MNCR is an example of a movement that uses several repertoires of interaction in actions focused on public waste management policies (ROSSI, 2019; BRANDÃO, 2018). The actions of social movements such as the MNCR bring demands from social groups to decision-making arenas and are able to make important contributions to public policies, with new perspectives on the problems at hand.

“What distinguishes the action of social movements in the subsystems of public policies is the fact that they offer ordinary people a possibility of organizing themselves collectively to make their voices heard in the decision-making circles. By bringing players and interests previously not considered by decision-makers into the subsystems, social movements trigger a set of confrontational interactions.” (ABERS; SILVA; TATAGIBA, 2018, p. 106).

Radcliffe (2004) reiterates the importance of understanding structural social processes beyond the economic concerns of local players, which foster social movements, particularly the relationships between society and the State. Creative responses to moments of crisis can bring about changes not only in economic relationships but also in political systems, with longer-lasting effects on relationships between the State and civil society, as expressed by Radcliffe as follows:

“...by looking at the transformations of civil society among grassroots players, we have a distinct entry point for understanding social and political changes in the region [Latin America]. Information about the players’ different experiences and responses to political and subsistence changes provide us with an understanding of what organized civil players can achieve (or not) in the context of neoliberalism and globalization.” (RADCLIFFE, 2004, p. 193).

In this paper, picker organizations are considered grassroots political movements (RADCLIFFE, 2004), designed ‘bottom-up’, which provide urban cleaning services, generate environmental and social benefits (by increasing recycling rates and generating jobs), and share an identity materialized in symbols and repertoires of action (GUTBERLET, 2015a; 2015b; 2020). Even the organizations that are formally integrated with municipalities maintain their identity as grassroots social movements, with varying degrees of antagonism to the existing systems, and seek participation in political decisions to achieve a more advantageous integration, interacting with the State at its various levels (CARLOS, 2020). Thus, they confront systems in which large companies are predominant, whose operations are characterized

by low recycling rates, concentrated income, and meager social participation in decisions.

“There are, however, barriers associated with the private economic interests involved, which, in turn, are part of a vicious circle that makes it difficult to break away from the contract-based logic that prioritizes collection, transshipment, and landfill use to the detriment of a broader and more inclusive selective waste collection.” (JACOBI; BESEN, 2011, p. 154)

In this context, picker organizations propose changes in “waste management regimes” (GILLE, 2007; GUTBERLET; BRAMRYDE; JOHANSSON, 2020), transforming technological (labor-intensive waste collection and transport), organizational (workers in associations and cooperatives), and policy (decentralization of services and greater transparency) aspects. MNCR’s work in the drafting of federal policies is an important example of this change-oriented action:

“[...] the amendment of the Sanitation Law (Lei de Saneamento, 2007) and the approval of the National Solid Waste Policy (Política Nacional de Resíduos Sólidos, 2010) included the pickers in federal regulatory frameworks. Policies for the allocation of goods and services were also conceived, with emphasis on two specific programs for these workers: Cataforte (originated in 2007), and Pró-Catador (started in 2011). In this unprecedented set of measures for this industry, it is noteworthy that all actions were conceived under the direct influence of a social movement by these workers, the Movimento Nacional de Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis” (ROSSI, 2019, p. 106).

### 3. Methodology

In order to understand the dynamic relationship between the picker organizations and players present in the public policy production arenas, this case study applied a qualitative approach, based on participatory research developed by an interdisciplinary team that has been working with pickers for many years.

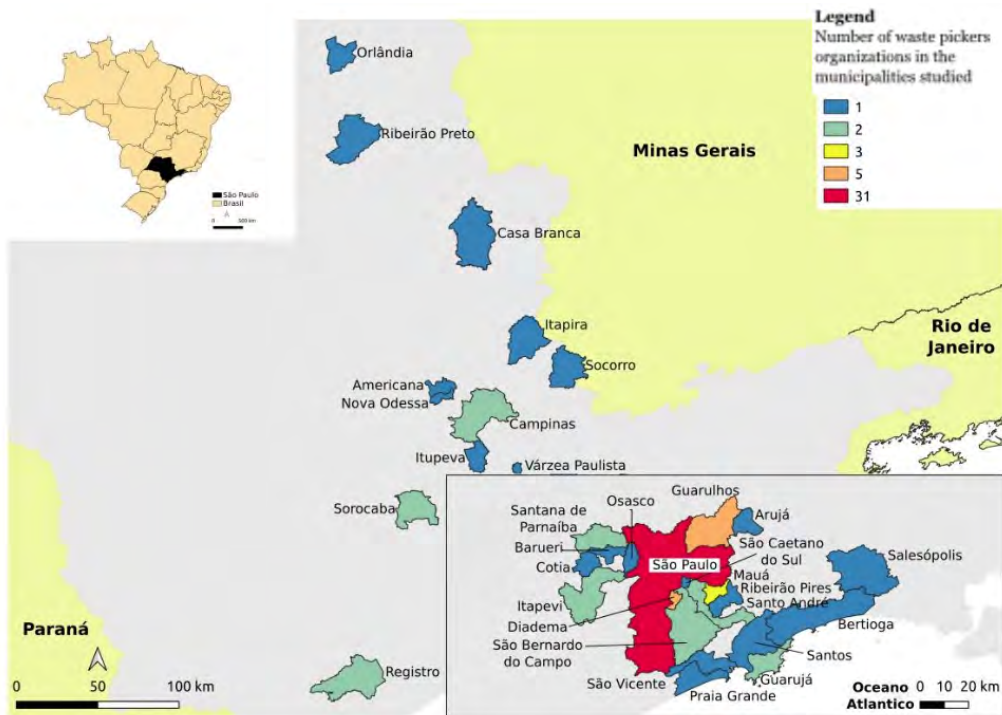
The groups studied show the diversity of organized pickers in the state of São Paulo regarding the size of the groups (10 or less and over 128 members), infrastructure (with or without access to equipment and truck), size of the municipalities (between 17 thousand and 12.2 million inhabitants), level of support received and participation in picker networks.

We adopted the perspective of the pickers through direct (telephone) or online (social media) contact, and no government authority, companies, or civil society organizations were consulted. The action of these players was revealed from bibliographic and documentary research and interviews with picker representatives.

We reviewed the bibliography on the impacts of the pandemic on pickers and collected data on waste management in the municipalities studied, thus characterizing local scenarios.

The total universe of cooperatives and associations in the study region comprises 75 groups (Map 1), of which 64 participated in our research

**Map 1: Scope of the municipalities in the region surveyed and the total number of organizations present in the municipalities selected**



Source: Research data

In our empirical research, we used two questionnaires applied in interviews via telephone and WhatsApp contact to a sample selected based on convenience (groups with whom the researchers were already in contact), covering, in total, 32 municipalities and a total of 64 organizations contacted. The following table shows which groups participated in which parts of the research (qualitative, quantitative, or both) (Table 1).

**Table 1: Universe of picker organizations that participated in the research**

Municipality (Total 32)	Number and name of picker organizations contacted by municipality	
Americana	1	Cooper Lírios
Arujá	1	CORA
Barueri	1	CooperYara

Bertioga	1	Coopersubert
Campinas	2	Antônio da Costa Santos / Nova Vida
Casa Branca	1	Cooperscab
Cotia	1	Coopernova*
Diadema	2	CooperFenix* / Coop Cidade Limpa*
Guarujá	2	Cooperben* / Mundo Novo
Guarulhos	5	Guarulhos Recicla / Coop. Reciclável / Respira Brasil / Recicla Mais Guarulhos / Luta e Vida
Itapevi	1	Ganhando Vidas
Itapira	1	Ascorsi
Itupeva	1	CRI
Mauá	2	Coopercata* e Coopermape
Nova Odessa	1	Cooper Sonhos
Orlândia	1	Cooperlol**
Osasco	1	CooperNatuz
Praia Grande	1	ACAMAR
Registro	1	Cooperativa de Registro
Ribeirão Pires	1	Cooperpires**
Ribeirão Preto	1	Mãos Dadas**
Salesópolis	1	Cooperares
Santana de Parnaíba	1	AVEMARE*
Santo André	1	Cidade Limpa*
Santos	1	CooperBrasil
São Bernardo do Campo	2	Reluz* / CooperLuz*
São Caetano do Sul	1	Cooptresc**

São Paulo	23	Associação 28 Associação Nova Glicério* Casa do Catador Coopamare** Cooper Butantã Cooper Leste Cooper Vira Lata Cooperativa Chico Mendes - SP Cooperativa Fênix Ágape Cooperativa Filadelfia Cooperativa Tiquatira Cooperativa União de Itaquera Cooperativa Vitória do Belém Coopercaps (Matriz)* Coopercral* Coopere* Cooperglicério* Cooperpac* Cooperparelheiros* CooperVivaBem (Matriz)* Rainha da reciclagem Reciclacity Recifavela
São Vicente	1	Reciclagem é Viver
Socorro	1	Corenova
Sorocaba	2	Coreso / Coopereso
Várzea Paulista	1	Eco & Vida
32 Municipalities	64 Cooperatives	**5 Cooperatives - qualitative research only 42 Cooperatives - quantitative research only *17 Cooperatives - qualitative and quantitative research
<b>Network Coverage</b>		
<b>Network Coverage</b>	<b>Number of Cooperatives</b>	<b>Network Name</b>
Four municipalities in the ABC region	7	Coopcent ABC
Municipality of São Paulo	7	FEPACOOORE
Southwest of the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo	7	Rede Verde Sustentável
São Paulo, Alto Tietê e Litoral Sul	23	Rede CataSampa
Municipality of São Paulo and interior	10	Rede Sul

Source: Research data

The first questionnaire with closed-ended questions (structured) was applied from March to September 2020 to 59 picker organizations, focusing on quantitative information about changes generated by the pandemic, including the number of workers, health impacts, the volume of recyclables commercialized and income, working conditions and municipal policies.

A second questionnaire was applied, of a qualitative and semi-structured nature, from May to September 2020 to 22 picker organizations (see Table 1). In addition, this questionnaire was also applied to the Comitê de Catadores da Cidade de São Paulo (MNCR) and to the leaders of five cooperative networks that are related to the contacted organizations (Coopcent ABC, FEPACORE, Rede Verde Sustentável, Rede CataSampa, and Rede Sul).

The transcripts of the interviews had their content analyzed (HAY, 2016), and emerging patterns and perceptions were categorized based on general themes, along with a list of events, contacts, and activities that occurred in the pickers' daily routines. The categories were based on the impacts of the pandemic and actions by the players. The main results were presented to the interviewees for validation and complementation.

## 4. Results and discussion

In the discussion of the results, we will link discoveries about 'macro' dynamics with the 'micro' results of field research aiming at understanding the reactions of picker organizations to the pandemic crisis, highlighting the interaction between the social movement and the State. Next, we will present the data by discussing the following items: Situation of the picker organizations in Brazil (4.1) and in the municipalities studied before and during the pandemic; public policies during the pandemic (4.2) and actions by the picker organizations and support networks and the impacts of the pandemic (4.3).

### 4.1 *The situation of picker organizations in Brazil during the pandemic*

In this subsection, we will present data from recent research by institutions related to waste management in Brazil, particularly regarding public policies and the relationship between the agents that make up management systems.

In Brazilian municipalities, which are responsible for waste management, there is great diversity in the interaction between pickers and municipal governments. Research carried out by Compromisso Empresarial para a Reciclagem - Cempre (2020) in a sample of 205 municipalities found that selective waste collection done by pickers services 16.44% of the population and public cleaning services performed by private companies contracted by city halls in Brazil, servicing 50.8% of the population in these municipalities. As for the relationship between city halls and the pickers, of the 549 picker organizations surveyed by Cempre (2020), 33.88% had contracts; 39.89% had another type of formal bond (agreement term/grant agreement), and 25.5% had no bond. In another sample of 405 organizations, Cempre (2020) found that 53.3% did not receive any paid support from the City Hall, only

physical space and equipment. In addition, 56.47% of the organizations were supported by private reverse logistics programs.<sup>1</sup> In 86.71% of the organizations, workers have a low monthly income, between 0.5 and two minimum wages (Cempre, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

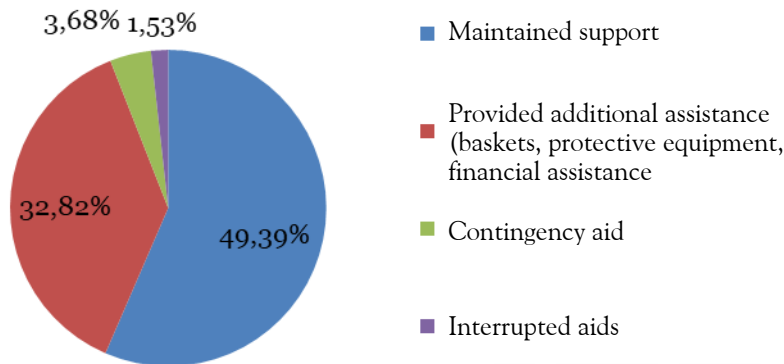
Another survey by the Associação Nacional de Catadores e Catadoras de Materiais Recicláveis - ANCAT (2020) found that 30.7% of the total volume of selective waste collection in Brazil in 2018 was carried out by pickers. In a sample of 336 organizations, 35% said they received selective waste collection materials that are the responsibility of the city halls, and 152 organizations had a formal relationship with them; out of this total, 59% had a contract, and 40% had a partnership/agreement grant; 166 organizations had contracts with companies, and 112 presented contracts or partnership agreements for collection in federal or state agencies.

Research by the Brasileira de Engenharia Sanitária e Ambiental - ABES (2020) indicated a 4-19% reduction in urban solid waste generation in 23 capitals due to the pandemic. Nine capitals interrupted selective waste collection services due to the pandemic, and in 10 capitals there was a reduction of 12-50% of the total volume collected.

The research estimated the incidence of COVID-19 among urban cleaning workers, 5.47 times higher than the Brazilian average, with 6.5 times higher deaths rates (ABES, 2020). Picker organizations accounted for 7% of all these cases.

In view of these impacts, research carried out in 326 municipalities by CEMPRE (2020) showed the following situation regarding the relationship between picker organizations and city halls (Graph 1):

**Graph 1 - Situation of the support provided by city halls to picker organizations**



Source: Cempre (2020)

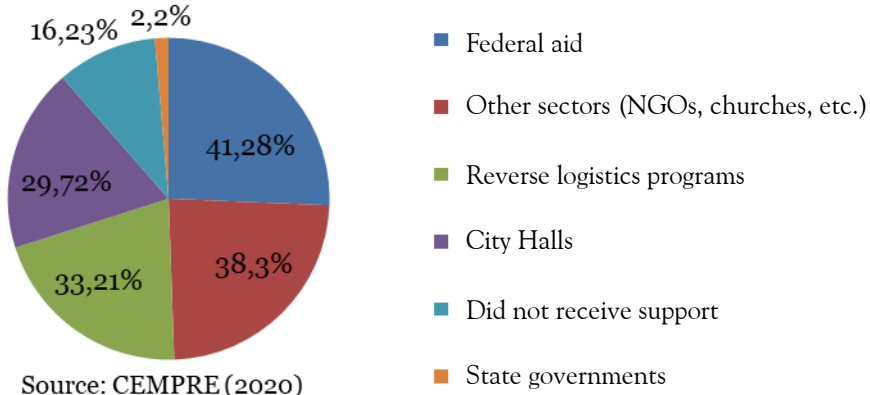
In a sample of 546 picker organizations (CEMPRE, 2020), the distribution of support

1 - Reverse logistics programs are company initiatives in response to recent requirements for the liability of producers of waste-generating goods, including hazardous waste and mass-consumer goods (BRANDÃO, 2019).

2 - Research by ANCAT (2020) involving a sample of 278 organizations indicated an average monthly income of R\$ 932.19 per picker in 2019.

received from various institutions during the pandemic is represented in Graph 2.

Graph 2 - Types of support received by picker organizations



In 58.72% of the organizations, there was a decrease in income; for 20% there was no change, 12.48% reported an increase, and 8.81% did not have this information. Considering 431 organizations, CEMPRE (2020) reports that for 61.25% of organizations the prices paid for recyclables decreased; 20.19% reported an increase, to 15.55% there was no change, and 3.02% did not have that information.

In the context of the pandemic, the political movements by pickers called on governments and companies to recognize their services as essential. The MNCR (2020) published an “Open Letter by Pickers of the City of São Paulo in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic,” endorsed by more than 36 institutions, declaring to be “[...] *impossible not to recognize the essential nature of this activity, as well as the worsening of the social and economic situation of these professionals.*”

#### 4.2 Public policies for pickers in the context of the pandemic in the municipalities studied

Municipal waste management systems directly influence the work of the pickers and the results of the policies. According to data from the Municipal Solid Waste Diagnosis (MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT, 2020), in 11 of the 32 municipalities studied, selective waste collection serviced less than 50% of the population in 2019; in eight municipalities, it serviced 50-100%, and in ten 100% (data from three municipalities were not available). The percentage recycled over the total collected was less than 0.5% in five municipalities; 0.5-1% in five municipalities; 1-1.5% in four municipalities; 1.5-2% in six municipalities, and 2-2.5% in three municipalities. Only six municipalities exceeded the national average of recycling 3%

of all collected waste as estimated by ABRELPE (2020): Barueri (4.43%), Orlandia (8.62%), Salesópolis (33.32%), Santana de Parnaíba (6.5%), São Bernardo do Campo (3.23%), and Socorro (8.89%). Of the total universe of municipalities studied, data from three of them were not available at THE MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT (2020).

In this unfavorable context, aggravated by the pandemic, the most comprehensive Policy for pickers was the federal emergency aid (Law 13.982/2020), proposed by the legislature, an aid of R\$ 600 per month to the unemployed, informal workers, and microentrepreneurs.

In the municipalities surveyed, the State and Municipal Governments<sup>3</sup> implemented some actions aimed at picker organizations. The *Companhia de Tecnologia e Saneamento Ambiental* (CETESB), the State's environmental control agency, has suspended the recycling obligations of picker organizations in reverse logistics contracts with manufacturers' associations while maintaining financial or social aid.

In response, large manufacturers supported picker organizations that are part of reverse logistics programs, such as the "Dê a Mão para o Futuro" of the Associação Brasileira da Indústria de Higiene Pessoal e Cosméticos (ABIHPEC), and "Reciclar pelo Brasil", financed by large manufacturers in the food and beverage industry, including financial contributions at the beginning of quarantine and food baskets for groups that are partners with ABIHPEC.

Such support helped maintain pickers afloat, but its short-term and welfarist nature did not guarantee a lasting adaptation of the organizations to the crisis.

The State Public Defender Office recommended that the State and municipalities maintained minimum income or payments to the pickers during the quarantine, based on national guidelines for the Public Prosecutor's Offices to ensure the rights of the pickers (NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE PUBLIC PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE, 2020).

The municipality of São Paulo published Resolution 146/2020, on the *Autoridade Municipal de Limpeza Urbana* (AMLURB), which authorized the use of the *Fundo Paulistano de Reciclagem* to assist the 1,400 pickers registered in training programs by providing them with R\$ 600 monthly for independent pickers and R\$ 1,200 monthly for pickers of registered organizations. This aid would be maintained during the quarantine as long as there were resources. This fund consists of the sales of Mechanized Sorting Plants and would be destined to the pickers even without the pandemic. Other municipalities announced short-term aids, such as São Bernardo do Campo, which paid an aid of R\$ 1,000 to cooperative members for a month; in Sorocaba, the aid was of R\$ 1,000, which was interrupted after a month; in Arujá, R\$ 600 per month were paid only at the beginning of the pandemic.

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3 - This support is the result of decades of action by picker organizations, including the MNCR and local cooperative networks, which promote dialog with governments.

### 4.3 Impacts and actions by picker organizations

#### 4.3.1 Income and financial situation

The semi-structured interviews carried out with 22 picker organizations and representatives from five picker networks and from the City Committee revealed that most groups had their income and the financial situation of their organizations compromised by the pandemic (18 of the 22 groups surveyed) due to the need to stop selective waste collection services, closure of waste screening plants, and other restrictions necessary to contain the pandemic. Three groups stated that there was no variation in their income, and one of the groups even declared an increase in income due to an increase in the volume of waste arriving at the cooperative.

Many groups that were forced to shut down lost waste collection locales, including groups from São Paulo (Coopac, Cooperparelheiros, and Coopamare). Iracy of the Mãos Dadas cooperative of Ribeirão Preto reported that “they lost the contract for 150 collection locales” and, according to Dedé of Cidade Limpa of Santo André “the clients closed the doors”. Only for Coopresc of São Caetano do Sul “the intake of material increased, almost doubling or more”; for João of Cooperlôl of Orlândia, “nothing changed, the waste collection remained the same, the group continues to work with proper care, wearing masks and implementing sanitation protocols”. According to Maria da Penha, from Coopercata of Mauá “the group was affected because the materials were arriving less clean”, thus decreasing the production yield, “and buyers stopped buying, so... we had only two types of material to sell, white paper and cardboard”. Many participants mentioned that the price of the materials fell, reaching half of the prices prior to the pandemic.

The lack of cash flow was a problem for most organizations. For Mr. José of Cooperparelheiros of São Paulo, “everything can you think of that a financial company can suffer from we are going through here, rent, debts, light and water problems, everything because we have been without trade for over 40 days.” Cleiton, of Nova Glicério of São Paulo, reiterates: “The collections have fallen, were reduced, we had to go into quarantine due to the municipal decree, we had no cash flow, the Association has no cash flow”. Iracy, from Mãos Dadas reports: “the city hall suspended the contract, so we are not receiving anything from them. We don’t know how things will be until May 31st... Our concern is that there is an INSS debt.<sup>4</sup> We don’t know how to pay for that.”

Of the 59 picker organizations, 35 had their activities interrupted by the municipalities, and 24 altered their activities for safety, putting high-risk people on leave and reducing collection locales, pointing to a decrease in the demand for recyclables.

18 out of the 59 organizations received municipal financial aid, with an increase of 30% in the average monthly income (an increase from an average of R\$ 877 to R\$1,144), even with the interruption of activities. In addition, no workers abandoned their posts in these groups.

4 - National Social Security Institute

10 of the 59 organizations have service contracts with the city halls that were active during the research. However, in these groups, there was an average decrease of 5% in the number of cooperative members and a reduction of 11% in the average volume of recyclables sold monthly, from 97 to 86 tons. However, no major impact on income was mentioned.

The groups without municipal aid, 31 of the 59 organizations, had a drop of 5% in the number of cooperative members, of 47% in the sales of recyclables (from an average of 92 to 49 tons per month), and an average decrease in their monthly income of 40%, from R\$ 980 to R\$ 589.

#### 4.3.2 Preventive measures taken during the pandemic

The 22 organizations that responded to the qualitative research declared 17 cases of infection by Covid among its members, in five organizations. Initially (May 2020) there were two cases of Covid-19 reported among about 2,153 pickers (the total number for the 22 groups involved in the qualitative research) of the organizations that participated in the research; in the following month, the number rose to 10, and, in August, there were five more. It is important to point out that this is an approximate estimate since some respondents are likely to omit this information or not have been notified by members of the organizations due to fear of interrupting the operations or, individually, of being removed from work. It is also important to highlight the lack of testing among the Brazilian population in general, as well as the difficulties that low-income organizations and individuals have in accessing Covid tests, whose cost is quite high.

In terms of measures to prevent infection among the members of the organizations, they were different in the groups. The most frequent measure was hand and surface sanitation using disinfectants combined with the use of masks (10 groups). Four groups reported this strategy combined with actions of social distancing among their members (splitting of shifts and mealtimes). Two groups were quarantining received materials, i.e. isolating incoming material in a designated area prior to screening, for periods of up to two days, and only one group made use of masks as their only measure. Finally, five groups imposed the interruption of activities based on determinations of their city halls (São Bernardo do Campo and São Paulo).

The 22 groups interviewed classified the working situations during the crisis as: usual (no change), partial (part of the activities suspended), and interrupted. In May 2020, 11 of the groups worked partially, nine groups were interrupted, and two worked as usual. In July, the number of groups working as usual increased to 12, and the interrupted one fell to six. In August, 12 groups were working as usual and five were interrupted. Most groups have put high-risk workers on leave.

Several groups reported mental health problems. According to Tereza, of Cooper VivaBem of São Paulo, “the pandemic has affected us both financially and psychologically, because... we are home, everyone is afraid, and everyone is without pay... people used to working are at home complaining, with no money, no means to survive... some people just had a lot on their

minds, with no money and bills arriving”. Murilo of CooperNova (Cotia) reports the pressure on leaderships regarding the need for greater control over the use of PPE and sanitation: “it’s always the same talk, this takes its toll... it really is the stress of taking care of people.” Eight groups detected at least one individual with mental health problems, and four groups carried out actions to solve this issue (Avemare, Coopere, Cooperpires, CooperVivabem).

The most frequent precautions were to put high-risk groups on leave and use individual protective equipment, in addition to frequent sanitation. The means of communication (email, WhatsApp, and telephone) were important for learning preventive measures and to carrying out meetings, gatherings and for delivering information to the groups. Patrícia, of Cooperlimpa of Diadema, says that “from the start, we were being careful, we started to sanitize things differently, we bought alcohol gel, we are sanitizing our hands more often... we bought surgical gloves to wear under the conventional gloves, and that is how we are working. Everyone is working wearing a mask... at first, we bought disposable masks, but that was too expensive... the consumption is too great, so we chose to buy cloth masks... at the end of the afternoon, we take them home and sanitize them”. To Murilo of CooperNova of Cotia “we are working in the cooperative in the same way, the only thing that changed here was the organization. Lunch hours are alternated, people don’t have meals together, so no one can chat, nor agglomerate. We are taking as much care as possible so that no one is harmed. Now everyone wears a mask at all times”. Another measure was the introduction of several shifts with a reduced number of cooperative members; one group also mentioned the use of goggles as an additional measure. A single group (CooperNova) purchased Covid-19 tests for their members.

#### 4.3.3 Vulnerabilities identified during the pandemic

In general, the main vulnerabilities identified during the pandemic were, in addition to the loss of income discussed in section 4.3.1., the lack of support for organizations to continue covering their costs (maintenance, water, light, services, etc.) regularly (Table 2) and the impossibility of groups at high-risk of Covid contagion to continue working. Ten groups reported the need to put elderly people on leave, a group that often finds in picker organizations their only possibility of work and income.

**Table 2: Situation of support for maintaining picker organizations during the pandemic**

Situation	Number of Groups
No support	13
City hall support	5
Private partner support	1
Private partner and city hall support	1
Did not answer	2

Source: Research data

As in other social sectors, the pandemic uncovered many vulnerabilities that were previously unnoticed. Cooperatives generate income for a large number of vulnerable individuals with advanced age and/or with health or social problems. Since most of them depend on the cooperative to survive, those who were not eligible for federal financial aid have experienced major difficulties, such as retirees. According to Ionara, Avemare (Santana de Parnaíba), “the situation is very difficult because our income comes exclusively from the cooperative”. Mr. José of Cooperparelheiros (São Paulo) confirms: “We have already hit rock bottom but seem to be sinking even lower. We can’t even think of an alternative for the moment in anything because we are completely dependent on the waste of the city, and if everything stops, we are the first ones to be affected.” Some groups reported up to 15 days with no income, after which they can go hungry. Most of them have no financial reserve: Cleiton, of Associação Nova Glicério (São Paulo), reports: “We know that many families can’t weather [having no income] for long because it is complicated, and you live in large urban centers where you need capital to survive and planting and harvesting is not an option, there are no springs, no water, and you rely on Sabesp<sup>5</sup>”.

The utility bills (power, water, rent) at home and the cooperative are a major problem. Some pickers are at risk of eviction: according to Maria Mônica of Cooperfênix (Diadema): “...paying bills, power, water, rent, I’m personally unable to, I have no source of money. The only things I can still pay for are my uncle’s diapers and medication, and these things are expensive... I don’t know if I can do this for another two months. For real, because if I don’t pay rent, I will end up being evicted”. The situation in CooperNova (Cotia) is similar, as Murilo describes: “for most of us here if we are without work for a week, this already has a very big impact on our ability to pay for bills and debts.” Iracy of Mãos Dadas (Ribeirão Preto) confirms this vulnerability: “I have a daughter who lives with me and a 17-year-old boy, and we have to pay for water, power, phone and buy food. Do you think that with the R\$ 500 I make and my daughter with her R\$ 600 will be able to get by? We won’t get by. We are going to go hungry.” The need for the recycling income forced some groups to continue working, as João of Cooperlol (Orlândia) explains: “Actually, I and my family, we have no other income other than the income of our work, so I don’t know what we would do if we had to stop working.” According to Dedé, of the Cooperativa Cidade Limpa (Santo André), “we will try to survive, but with difficulty, because we have no financial reserves. Currently, my apartment installment that I owe the city hall (CDHU) is overdue, my condominium payment is overdue, power is overdue, all because of the bad situation in which we find ourselves here”.

The pickers are also worried about the lack of resources for covering organizations’ expenses, such as power bills, water bills, taxes, etc., in addition to not being able to carry out the necessary maintenance for operations and investments for their members (training, PPE, improvements in common areas of the cooperative, such as the cafeteria, bathrooms, etc.).

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5 - Basic Sanitation Company of the State of Sao Paulo

#### 4.3.4 The role of the government in the current situation

Regarding government action during the pandemic, participants of the qualitative research emphasized the role of local governments (municipalities), which are the spheres directly responsible for waste management activities, which includes the work of the cooperatives, most often governed by contract terms, grant agreements or other partnership instruments. The vast majority of respondents considered the government's actions negative (12 groups); seven groups considered the government's actions positive, two groups remained neutral, with responses that expressed no opinion, and one group did not answer the question.

Several participants, such as Marcelo of Cooperem of Guarujá, mentioned that the pandemic evidenced the precarious situation of pickers: "What is surfacing is the total lack of understanding by the government authorities of what selective collection is, who the pickers are... The interruption of selective waste collection based on a municipal decree without even discussing this with the pickers, without knowing what we do, without even providing us with instructions... This shows a complete lack of knowledge of what our industry, our workers do, produce, and represent in this matter of the recycling production chain". In many municipalities of Brazil, pickers are not considered actual partners in the management of solid waste. Frustration with invisibility is frequent in interviews. To Teresa, da Coopervivabem (São Paulo)... "politicians do not care about the reality of our population". Marcelo of Cooperbem (Guarujá) demands "the work of pickers in selective waste collection to be recognized as an essential service, similar to that of garbage collectors, who receive better equipment, better instruction... are featured in the local media teaching people how to properly separate their waste and not to mix masks, gloves, anything that could possibly contaminate garbage collectors... Then we ask, who are we in this process?" Maria Aparecida of Cooperglícério (São Paulo) reiterates: "our work should also be considered essential. "

Only a few participants considered a change, with the government paying more attention to pickers, such as Cleiton of Associação Nova Glicério (São Paulo): "the pandemic made the government start seeing hearing the population. " Some groups in São Paulo also praised the municipality for the payment of aids from the Fundo Paulistano de Reciclagem. To Valquíria of Cooperpac (São Paulo), "the government is doing part of what it has to do."

The difference between groups registered with the city hall of São Paulo and groups without ties t it is evident in the testimonial by Carioca, of Coopercaps (São Paulo): "the only thing that is sad is that now the organized groups that are not part of the town's socio-environmental program see the importance of having a partnership with the public authorities. I have seen this and witnessed several groups who said: I don't want the city hall interfering with my work, I don't want to be accountable... That was before the pandemic, now everyone is looking for...some support, hence the importance of having indeed a partnership with public authorities."

#### 4.3.5 Importance of partnerships and supporting actions

Organized pickers have a wide network of partners (companies and city halls), collaborators (NGOs), and supporters, as well as networks of pickers and of the MNCR, which during the research supported the groups mainly with food baskets and hygiene products. In the mix of support declared by the 22 representatives of the picker organizations surveyed, we noticed a higher frequency of private institutions (mentioned by 17 groups), networks of picker organizations (mentioned by 10 groups), public networks (nine groups), picker movement (seven groups), and NGOs (five groups).

The most mentioned private support was from ABIHPEC (11 groups) and Braskem petrochemical industry (8 groups). Some groups received food baskets from the local city halls (São Paulo, Mauá, Ribeirão Preto and Santo André). Non-affiliated groups of São Paulo (Coopervivabem, Associação Nova Glicério and Cooperglicério) did not receive any municipal aid and were in worse situations. Some groups mentioned support from the public defender office and universities. Several networks (Catasampa, CoopcentABC, FEPACOOORE, Rede Sul, Rede Verde Sustentável) provided support, as well as the Comitê da Cidade de São Paulo (an organization with 32 groups), ANCAT and MNCR. With support from the MNCR and the NGO Instituto GEA Ética e Meio Ambiente some cooperative members have been receiving remote psychological care.

Representatives of the picker networks reported that the pandemic has affected production because several municipalities determined the organizations shut down. According to Carlos Henrique of Rede CataSampa, “Covid-19 affected the network mainly due to the operational downtime... many municipalities do not consider the selective waste collection and work pickers do as an essential job. And we are also afraid of the high rate of contamination and of exposing pickers through their work, at first, we interrupted operations 100%...currently, 60% of the enterprises [groups] have been completely interrupted, are paralyzed, and 40% are working in a precarious way, in an emergency character, so they are not completely without their only source of income...”. To Viviane, CoopcentABC was affected because some cooperatives that used to contribute with payments to maintain the network stopped working, such as the cooperatives of São Bernardo do Campo.

On the other hand, to Jair of FEPACOOORE, “it was a time that brought us closer together because the cooperatives were kind of doing their own thing, and in these moments of difficulties the network is important to provide support, make resources, food, etc. available, through the network, we were able to get a lot of donations and provide good help to cooperative members”.

The bond with the city hall of São Paulo greatly minimized the impact on Rede Sul, but network organizations in other municipalities are experiencing difficulties, according to Carioca: “Since in our network we have cooperatives in the city of São Paulo where all have contracts with Amlurb, this provides some peace of mind, because we are receiving a transfer of funds of R\$1,200 per cooperative member, but for the cooperatives in the interior, only Campinas and Nova Odessa are not receiving any support from the government authorities...”

The network has been trying to contact the city halls but to no avail. The pickers there are experiencing great difficulty, which is precisely due to the lack of support from public authorities”.

Four of the five networks surveyed did not interrupt their activities. Only Rede Sul partially interrupted them due to the shutting down of the network cooperatives. The testimonial by Jair of FEPACCOORE indicates little support for the maintenance of these organizations: “at the moment, they are seeking support mainly for the cooperatives, because the cooperative members are very well served with resources from the city hall, emergency aid, food staple baskets, masks, hygiene kits, cleaning products, meat, milk, we made all of this available for cooperative members through the network. Now the cooperatives’ bills are still coming, and they have no source of income, thus no way to pay them, so they are having to turn to banks, with interest, so, right now, we are seeking financial support for our cooperatives”.

Luzia, of Comitê da Cidade, says that “she started to worry about people’s survival, so the first step was to raise funds for food. The second step was the letter, telling the authorities and partners (who signed it) that it is unfair to interrupt the work of cooperatives, that there are almost a thousand workers, plus contractors, forced to isolate, to stay at home, because they also have nothing to sell, the junkyards are also closed”. In partnership with NGOs, Comitê da Cidade bought food staples baskets and held virtual meetings with Brazilian pickers, and participated in a public hearing with the Human Rights Secretariat to discuss support for the pickers.

About the role of the government during the crisis, Carlos Henrique of CataSampa assesses that “... we operate in three major regions of the state of São Paulo: the capital, coastline and Alto Tietê...here in Alto Tietê Condemat<sup>6</sup> has provided full support so we can have the minimum security and aid... Condemat held some videoconferences with us to be able to discuss and detail some things. In São Paulo capital things are more difficult because of the politics of São Paulo; and the coastline, since it is a tourism city, makes things even more difficult. So the local government, in general, has supported and helped the cooperatives... the role [of the government] during this crisis is a bit troubled...it could be better and there could have been more effective support, another perspective, not worrying about politics... a different outlook... As much as possible, some mayors...has given some support to cooperatives, but very minimal”.

According to Carioca (Rede Sul), “the local government of the city of São Paulo was a step ahead and since the 18th [March] published a decree that forced sorting plants to stop their activities, thus preserving the health and life of pickers, and guaranteed monthly payments of R\$ 1,200. So the pickers are receiving this support from the public authorities... 70-80% managed to receive the federal government aid of R\$ 600 (emergency aid), so they are managing to keep afloat”.

Some interviewees mentioned actions to expand the cooperation between the picker

6 - The *Consórcio de Desenvolvimento dos Municípios do Alto Tietê*, responsible for solid waste management in the region.

networks. Rede Sul has signed a cooperation agreement with FEPACOOORE, increasing the number of contacts and partnerships, and managing to collect about 43 tons of food, as well as hygiene and cleaning products, distributed to the network cooperatives and unorganized pickers. To Jair of FEPACOOORE: “We have been working in partnership with other networks, yesterday I was with Eduardo of Movimento Nacional de Catadores and Coopamare, providing some items for them to distribute to contractor pickers, we have been carrying out good work between FEPACOOORE and Rede Sul, which since last year already had a technical collaboration agreement, so whatever the company gets of support here through FEPACOOORE we share with Rede Sul, and whatever Rede Sul manages to get of support they share with FEPACOOORE.”

The CataSampa network is part of the MNCR and close to ANCAT and the national organization Unicatadores<sup>7</sup>, so it participated in the campaign of solidarity with the pickers. According to Rosa, from Rede Verde Sustentável, “currently, we have partners like Unisol<sup>8</sup> São Paulo, with Fundação Banco do Brasil to deliver food staples baskets, ... and the support from ABIHPEC”.

The Coopcent ABC network also received support from ABIHPEC, Braskem, the Public Ministry of Labor (MPT), Public Defenders Offices, and Unisol São Paulo, in addition to NGOs that donated food staples baskets. Coopcent ABC has also started a campaign to raise funds.

Several testimonials mention the dependence on one-off aids. According to Jair, “bills are still arriving at the cooperatives, I myself, for example, have a case of a cooperative that pays rent for its shed and is already being evicted, so that matter of support for cooperatives, for legal persons, financial aid to pay the bills, is the thing we have been missing the most.” The Rede Verde Sustentável is in a better position because “it has the working capital of ABIHPEC which helped solve problems” (for example, the payment of the INSS of one of the groups).

## 5. Conclusions

The Covid-19 crisis placed picker organizations in a critical situation, forcing them to solve problems that ideally should have been handled by the State in interaction with Civil Society organizations and mediated by federal, state, and municipal policies involving also private players.

The organizations researched have managed to avert some of the negative impacts of the pandemic, meeting their basic needs. Nevertheless, these institutions rely on a series of collective actions of this social movement: internal structuring of the groups, articulation with external institutions, actions by the MNCR, articulations with the government (particularly the municipalities), and partner companies.

It is noticeable the low priority given to pickers both by governments, whose obligation

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7 - It brings together waste picker cooperatives from all over Brazil.

8 - Central of Cooperatives and Solidarity Initiatives.

to process municipal waste relies on the work of pickers, as well as by companies interested in complying with environmental regulation and improving their image. The resources obtained by the pickers are thanks to their actions as a social movement, supported by legislation that requires governments and companies to support them.

The actions researched show great variety, largely based on the municipal context, where the waste management is decided, including the existing policies and actions by the support networks and picker organizations. In the 32 municipalities studied, the support of MNCR and cooperative networks was important.

The 32 municipalities vary greatly in terms of selective waste collection and recycling policies. During the pandemic, the aid provided for organizations that lost part of their income was also varied, with some groups with no specific aid, and others with different types of support and in a better situation. Groups more connected to the public authorities (which is the case of approved organizations in São Paulo) had access to financial aid, but even this type of aid was quite precarious and unequally distributed in many municipalities. The most widely used aid, in addition to the federal emergency aid, was provided by private organizations that manage reverse logistics programs in the form of donations of food staples and hygiene products and, to a lesser extent, financial payments.

All aid was directed to individuals, members or not of picker organizations. For organizations (including their networks), essential items for operations, such as maintenance, taxes, cash flow, and everyday expenses such as water and power, did not feature in the different types of support provided. This shows the perception by pickers' public and private partners that support is restricted to social assistance, disregarding the operations of organizations that currently ensure the recycling of a large portion of the waste collected. In other words, policies are still welfarist and not industry-specific.

The demands for the work of the pickers to be recognized as an essential service are yet another episode of the historical struggle for recognition, present ever since the movement intensified its activity. Even with high exposure to contamination, little has been done by public and private partners in terms of prevention (for example, Covid-19 tests). The predominant solution, by decision of the municipalities, was to interrupt the activities of the organizations, who were left to organize themselves measures to mitigate impacts and prevent infections (use of hygiene and protection products, putting at-risk workers on leave, providing mental health care), with the support of several players, in particular the social movement national organizations and local networks.

It can be concluded that the work solid waste collection and selection carried out by pickers is an essential public service that should receive formal support (GUTBERLET, 2020). As such, it is essential that public policies ensure the inclusion of pickers in formal selective waste collection programs. Future research can investigate in greater detail the barriers and opportunities for structural transformations in solid waste management systems, with social and productive inclusion of picker organizations, highlighting their relationships with public and private players, and valuing the environmental and social services provided by pickers.

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# Impactos da Covid-19 sobre catadores de materiais recicláveis organizados no Estado de São Paulo

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**Resumo:** O referencial teórico discute a relação entre movimentos sociais e políticas públicas, uma vez que catadores organizados interagem com diversos níveis de governo em situações de colaboração e conflito, prestam serviços de gerenciamento de resíduos municipais, sendo frequentes ações coletivas buscando melhorias nessa relação. Pesquisa documental e aplicação de questionários informam sobre as interações dos catadores, evidenciando problemas estruturais e sistêmicos que ganharam relevo com a crise, destacando suas dificuldades, conquistas e reivindicações como movimento social.

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*Artigo Original*

**Palavras-chave:** Catadores; movimentos sociais; gestão de resíduos sólidos; políticas públicas; Covid-19.

# Impactos del Covid-19 en los recicladores de materiales reciclables organizados en municipios seleccionados en el Estado de São Paulo

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**Resumen:** Este estudio, realizado con organizaciones de recicladores en 32 municipios del Estado de São Paulo, busca analizar los impactos de la pandemia de la Covid-19 en las actividades de estas organizaciones y sus miembros, incluyendo las medidas tomadas por el gobierno y otros actores para paliar los impactos resultantes de la crisis. El marco teórico discute la relación entre movimientos sociales y políticas públicas, ya que los recicladores organizados interactúan con diversos niveles de gobierno en situaciones de colaboración y conflicto, brindan servicios de gestión de residuos municipales, con frecuentes acciones colectivas que buscan mejoras. La investigación documental y la aplicación de cuestionarios informan sobre las interacciones de los recicladores, destacando los problemas estructurales y sistémicos, mostrando sus dificultades, logros y demandas como movimiento social.

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**Palabras-clave:** Recicladores, movimientos sociales; manejo de residuos sólidos; política pública; COVID-19.