

CASE STUDY REPORT



Interview at Visando o Futuro (Aiming for the Future) Association – Parolin, Curitiba

Study location	<i>Curitiba</i>
Organization or researcher who conducted the case study	<i>Green Franquias Sociais</i>
Date	<i>May to July 2025</i>

Introduction and Approach

This study aimed to evaluate the concept of "dignified income" for informal waste workers in the city of Curitiba, analyzing their working conditions, income levels, and the challenges they face.

In the local context, it was found that the city has an organized support structure for formal workers linked to cooperatives and associations through the EcoCidadão Project. This project offers logistical support, training, electric carts, food vouchers, and tax incentives, providing greater income stability and social inclusion. Despite this support, there is a significant presence of informal waste pickers, which increases competition, reduces the volume available for collection, and makes it harder to sell directly at fair prices due to reliance on middlemen.

The research revealed that formal waste pickers, although they have housing, mostly live in peripheral areas with poor infrastructure, while informal workers face even harsher conditions, including exposure to cold weather, food insecurity, and difficulty accessing buyers. The sample was composed of individuals who, due to the lack of opportunities in the formal labor market, turned to recycling as an immediate source of income. This group includes formerly incarcerated individuals, people with a history of social and family vulnerability, and cases of family abandonment or lack of support networks.

The study was conducted by Green Franquias, with in-person interviews carried out by two field researchers and a support team. The interviews took place in Curitiba, in the southern and southeastern regions of the city, covering the neighborhoods of Parolin, Sítio Cercado, and Alto Boqueirão. The research included the associations Visando o Futuro, Ecopar, Mutirão, and Pantanal, as well as the formal workers affiliated with them and the informal waste pickers who sell their materials at these locations. In total, 42 waste pickers were interviewed: 9 independents, 12 informally organized, and 21 formally organized.

Initially, support was sought from NGOs and institutions to access the informal sample, but due to low effectiveness, data collection was focused on the associations, ensuring representativeness and contextual accuracy in the responses.

A – Current Earnings of Waste Pickers

The survey shows that recyclable material collectors play a fundamental role in waste management and the recycling chain, operating at different levels of organization and facing significant structural and social challenges. A considerable portion of these workers enter this activity due to economic vulnerability and the lack of opportunities in the formal job market, relying on recycling as their only immediate source of income. Others follow a family trajectory, remaining in waste collection out of tradition and necessity, since their relatives also started in this field under conditions of socioeconomic hardship.

There are three main profiles of waste pickers: independent collectors, known as "carrinheiros" (waste picker cart collectors) who work alone on the streets with hand-pulled carts and have limited access to large volumes of material; informally organized pickers, who typically work with family members and have some additional structure, such as motorized

vehicles and storage space; and formally organized workers, integrated into associations and cooperatives with more robust infrastructure, including equipment, vehicles, PPE, sorting areas, and access to large-scale waste generators.

Most waste pickers dedicate themselves full-time to collection, although some supplement their income through social programs such as the Family Grant (Bolsa Família) or municipal benefits like the R\$440,00 food voucher offered in Curitiba to workers affiliated with cooperatives and associations. Work hours range from 3 to 15 hours per day, averaging 7.5 hours, influenced by material availability, physical condition, and family responsibilities.

Sources of material vary according to formalization: independent collectors mainly gather waste discarded in the streets, by households, and small businesses; formally organized workers obtain materials from large waste generators, companies, and municipal contracts. Events, renovations, and large cleanups seasonally impact on the volume of materials collected. All interviewees reported collecting PET, and about 90% collect HDPE, flexible plastics, paper/cardboard, and aluminum. Glass is less commonly collected due to its low market value and high density, while steel/scrap is the least collected, given the difficulty of finding it outside construction and renovation contexts.

Income comes almost exclusively from the sale of materials. Although recyclers pay better, most waste pickers sell to middlemen and scrapyards at lower prices. On average, PET/plastic sells for between R\$0,60 and R\$4,00 per kilo; paper/cardboard from R\$0,35 to R\$0,80; and aluminum from R\$7,00 to R\$11,00. Income is unstable, affected by price fluctuations, volume, and material quality.

Work resources also vary from hand-pulled carts to trucks provided by cooperatives and associations, as well as adapted bicycles and motor vehicles acquired by organized freelancers. However, 26% of interviewees reported not owning any vehicle, limiting their productivity.

Factors that limit earnings include low and unstable prices, low availability and quality of materials, lack of appropriate equipment, physical conditions, limited time, and low team productivity. Informal waste pickers have little bargaining power, facing buyer concentration and margin loss due to selling through intermediaries. Their living conditions reflect their vulnerability: some are homeless, nearly 60% reported food insecurity in the past year, and many live in precarious housing with environmental and safety risks and lack access to regular sanitation and electricity services.

The income limitations of waste pickers stem from widespread informality, limited access to direct buyers, and a lack of adequate equipment and consistent support structures. To address these challenges, it is essential to promote formalization and increase participation in cooperatives and associations by offering legal and documentation support to ease the process. Expanding access to modern equipment and adapted vehicles—such as ergonomic and motorized carts—can also boost collection efficiency and volume. Creating direct sales channels with recyclers would reduce reliance on intermediaries and ensure fairer prices. Investment is also needed in technical training programs and logistical support, with a focus on workplace safety and proper waste management. Furthermore, public policies that guarantee social protection—including minimum income, adequate food, dignified housing,

and universal access to healthcare—are vital for promoting dignity and well-being among these workers. Finally, fostering partnerships with the private sector for the direct contracting of collection services and supply of materials to cooperatives strengthens the economic sustainability of this work. Coordinated collaboration among public authorities, the private sector, and waste picker organizations is key to increasing income, reducing social vulnerability, and recognizing the essential role of these professionals in the circular economy and environmental protection.

B – Estimated Dignified Income

To estimate the income necessary for a dignified life for recyclable material waste pickers, the main components of a family's monthly cost of living were considered, based on the socioeconomic conditions and local realities of the group studied. The methodology was built upon a detailed breakdown of essential expenses related to food, housing, health, education, work, and savings. The goal was to define a minimum acceptable standard of living that ensures safety, well-being, and dignity.

The estimated monthly cost of a healthy diet for a typical family was calculated at R\$508. This estimate was based on the prices of a basic food basket designed to meet nutritional requirements for a balanced diet. Data were drawn from the price lists of the Armazém da Família (Family Warehouse) program, a municipal initiative in Curitiba that directly serves the target population. Product selection reflected local eating habits and the availability of affordable, healthy food.

To define what would be considered decent housing for waste pickers, a standard of basic, dignified low-income housing was adopted—one that aligns with the realities of those interviewed. Simple homes with adequate basic infrastructure and access to essential services were included. The average monthly cost for housing, including water, electricity, and sewage, was R\$1.372,00. This figure reflects housing in peripheral areas or low-income neighborhoods where most waste pickers live, while considering minimum health and safety conditions.

An allocation of 5% (equivalent to R\$ 201,05) was designated for healthcare and medication expenses, representing an estimate to cover costs not detailed in the survey, considering that most respondents use public health services. This percentage was adopted as a reference to account for the minimum costs related to healthcare, particularly given that many interviewees rely on the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS) and therefore have access to public services. The amount represents an estimated monthly expenditure on medications and other health-related expenses that could not be detailed in the survey, ensuring the inclusion of this essential component in the total calculation.

Similarly, a share of 5% (equivalent to R\$ 201,05) was allocated for education expenses. This estimate was used as a reference due to the impossibility of determining, through the survey, the actual average monthly amount spent by the group on this item. The allocation of this percentage aims to ensure the minimum inclusion of this essential expense in the calculation, recognizing the importance of education in securing a dignified life.

In the city of Curitiba, the reference for decent work costs for waste pickers can be observed in a model cooperative that complies with all legal, fiscal, and dignity standards. In this context,

the cooperative member is recognized as a partner, and his or her expenses directly reflect the services provided. Monthly expenses include food (breakfast and lunch) at R\$60 per day, totaling R\$1,320 for 22 working days, as well as R\$50 for the maintenance of personal protective equipment (PPE). Public transportation is also considered, with two bus fares per day at R\$6 each, totaling R\$264 per month. Another essential item is the social security contribution (INSS), calculated at 20% and corresponding to R\$535 per month. This amount is returned through governmental benefits, ensuring social protection for the worker. Therefore, the total monthly cost to guarantee decent working conditions in Curitiba is R\$2,169. It is important to note that the reality of informal waste pickers remains precarious, with no minimum guarantees and high risks, while cooperatives that follow proper labor standards represent the ideal model by providing dignity, safety, adequate equipment, as well as technical and sales support.

The dignified income estimates also included a savings margin equal to 10% of the total monthly costs, amounting to R\$445. This financial buffer intended to offer families a minimum safety net to handle unforeseen situations such as medical emergencies, home repairs, temporary income loss, or other unexpected expenses. Including this component underscores the importance of fostering economic stability and the capacity for medium- and long-term planning key elements in ensuring a truly dignified life.

C - Comparable Incomes or Minimum Wage

To estimate income benchmarks relevant to the reality of recyclable material collectors, salary references from occupations with similar working conditions were used, including the current national minimum wage of R\$1.518,00. The main reference considered was the income of formalized waste pickers, estimated based on the salaries of street sweepers and waste collectors, whose average wage in Curitiba is R\$1.828,00, according to recent collective bargaining agreements. Average wages were also analyzed in sectors characterized by low formal education and high physical demands, such as agriculture (R\$1.894,89) and construction (R\$2.673,00 base wage), based on union data. These occupations were chosen due to their similarity in terms of manual labor, informality, and exposure to adverse working conditions, aligning closely with the context of recyclable material collectors.

The selection of these benchmarks aimed to realistically represent the local socioeconomic context, recognizing that, although most work in the informal sector, their roles are comparable, in terms of effort and risk, to those of street sweepers, rural workers, and construction laborers. Based on this assessment, the living income for a full-time worker considering the amount required to support a family was estimated at R\$ 4,896. Dividing this figure by the average of 1.7 workers per household resulted in R\$ 2,880 as the individual living income, the minimum amount required to ensure basic living conditions.

The analysis highlights that current earnings do not reflect the effort and working conditions of recyclable material collectors, reinforcing the need for policies and actions that promote fair and adequate incomes in line with their reality.

Key Learnings and Recommendations

In the city of Curitiba, the activity of waste pickers reveals a reality marked by extreme physical effort, contact with contaminated or sharp materials, and constant exposure to street hazards. Despite low social recognition and persistent prejudice, many workers express satisfaction with their work, especially when formalized and integrated into associations, valuing collective interaction and a sense of belonging. For many, recycling represents not only a source of income but also an opportunity to rebuild their lives, with accounts of overcoming addictions and distancing themselves from illicit activities.

Collection is organized by scale, considering available volume, resale value, and ease of access. Paper and cardboard lead in volume (38%) and account for 26% of income, being widely collected due to their abundance in the streets, lightness, and ease of transport—particularly in commercial and residential areas with high packaging waste disposal. PET, although representing only 9% of the volume, contributes a significant 22% of income, reflecting its high added value in Curitiba, which surpasses that of São Paulo, making it highly attractive even in smaller quantities. Flexible and rigid plastics, with 6% and 7% of the volume respectively, have a smaller share of income as they require more sorting and effort to accumulate sufficient weight. Glass, accounting for 22% of the volume but only 3% of income, is primarily collected by structured associations and cooperatives that have vehicles and logistics suitable for handling this heavy and bulky material. Concentrated collection in bars, markets, and restaurants facilitates access and makes glass economically viable for organized groups. Other materials such as metal packaging (16% of income) and aluminum cans (5%) also play a relevant role, offering good value per weight.

The income of waste pickers varies according to their level of formalization: formalized workers earn the highest incomes, followed by those informally organized, while fully informal workers record the lowest earnings. Factors positively influencing income and well-being include access to motorized vehicles, structured workspaces, higher collection volumes, adequate and safety equipment, municipal financial support to associations, collective organization, and direct sales to buyers who pay fair prices. Among formal workers, the benefit of a food voucher worth R\$ 440.00 stands out, which can be used at “Armazéns da Família,” where food and hygiene products are sold at up to 30% discount, ensuring basic items and encouraging formalization.

To increase income stability and improve working conditions, it is necessary to replace human-pulled carts with lighter, ergonomic, or motorized models, as well as intensify awareness campaigns about proper waste separation and the social and environmental importance of waste pickers’ work. Associations and cooperatives have proven to be effective formalization tools, although barriers such as lack of documentation, difficulties in formal processes, and preference for the flexibility of informality still hinder full integration. Targeted impactful changes include providing personal protective equipment (PPE), support points for health and nutrition, and partnerships with low-cost popular restaurants for registered workers.

In the field of public policies, recommendations include supporting the issuance of identification documents, integrating waste pickers into municipal waste management systems, providing adequate workspaces and tools, creating fair trade mechanisms, and expanding housing, health, and education programs. The private sector can contribute by guaranteeing minimum prices for materials, facilitating informal workers’ access to recycling buyers, creating training and social inclusion programs, and compensating cooperatives for

collection from large waste generators. Practices such as donating basic food baskets, already adopted by some companies, could be expanded.

Among the challenges faced during the study were limited access to informal waste pickers, lack of official mapping and digital communication channels, limited time availability for interviews, and the complexity of traveling to peripheral areas with high crime rates. These obstacles underscore the urgency of strategies to engage and integrate this category into public and private policies aimed at socioeconomic inclusion and valuing urban recycling agents.