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Experiences of Waste Pickers in Latin America's Biggest Open Dump and the Transition to Cooperative Solution: A Thematic Analysis

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ARTIGO

Experiences of Waste Pickers in Latin America's Biggest Open Dump and the Transition to Cooperative Solution: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of waste pickers as they transition from working at the Estrutural landfill --- Latin America's largest open dump --- to joining cooperative structures in Brazil's Federal District. Using reflexive thematic analysis of 20 in-depth interviews conducted in June 2025, it investigates how these workers perceived this major change in their livelihoods and social conditions. Four key themes emerged: (1) Landfill Work Experiences, covering survival needs, hazardous conditions, violence, discrimination, and economic benefits; (2) Transition Process, involving the impactful closure and the tough adjustment to cooperative models; (3) Cooperative Work Experiences, highlighting improved conditions, dignity, organization, but also operational difficulties and limited government support; and (4) Social and Family Transformation, reflecting changes in family relations, educational access, and social recognition. The findings show that although the transition improved working conditions, safety, and social dignity, it also led to lower income and autonomy. The study underscores the

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complex process of formalizing informal work and offers critical insights for public policy, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive support systems that address both the advantages and challenges of cooperative integration and ensure sufficient government backing for sustainable waste management.

Keywords: waste pickers, cooperatives, thematic analysis, informal economy, social inclusion, Brazil

Transição de Catadores do Lixão para Cooperativas no Brasil

RESUMO

Este estudo explora as experiências de catadores de materiais recicláveis em sua transição do trabalho no aterro sanitário Estrutural — o maior lixão a céu aberto da América Latina — para a integração em cooperativas no Distrito Federal. Utilizando análise temática reflexiva de 20 entrevistas em profundidade realizadas em junho de 2025, o estudo investiga como esses trabalhadores perceberam essa grande mudança em seus meios de subsistência e condições sociais. Quatro temas principais emergiram: (1) Experiências de Trabalho em Aterro Sanitário, abrangendo necessidades de sobrevivência, condições de risco, violência, discriminação e benefícios econômicos; (2) Processo de Transição, envolvendo o fechamento impactante e a difícil adaptação aos modelos cooperativos; (3) Experiências de Trabalho em Cooperativas, destacando melhores condições, dignidade e organização, mas também dificuldades operacionais e apoio governamental limitado; e (4) Transformação Social e Familiar, refletindo mudanças nas relações familiares, acesso à educação e reconhecimento social. Os resultados mostram que, embora a transição tenha melhorado as condições de trabalho, a segurança e a dignidade social, também levou à redução da renda e da autonomia. O estudo destaca o complexo processo de formalização do trabalho informal e oferece insights cruciais para

políticas públicas, enfatizando a importância de sistemas de apoio abrangentes que abordem tanto as vantagens quanto os desafios da integração cooperativa e garantam apoio governamental suficiente para a gestão sustentável de resíduos.

Palavras-chave: catadores, cooperativas, análise temática, economia informal, inclusão social, Brasil

Transición de Recolectores del Basural a Cooperativas en Brasil

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora las experiencias de los recicladores en su transición de trabajar en el vertedero Estrutural —el vertedero a cielo abierto más grande de Latinoamérica— a unirse a cooperativas en el Distrito Federal de Brasil. Mediante un análisis temático reflexivo de 20 entrevistas a profundidad realizadas en junio de 2025, se investiga cómo estos trabajadores percibieron este importante cambio en sus medios de vida y condiciones sociales. Se identificaron cuatro temas clave: (1) Experiencias laborales en vertederos, que abarcan necesidades de supervivencia, condiciones de riesgo, violencia, discriminación y beneficios económicos; (2) Proceso de transición, que incluye el impactante cierre y la difícil adaptación a los modelos cooperativos; (3) Experiencias laborales en cooperativas, que destacan la mejora de las condiciones, la dignidad y la organización, pero también las dificultades operativas y el limitado apoyo gubernamental; y (4) Transformación social y familiar, que refleja cambios en las relaciones familiares, el acceso a la educación y el reconocimiento social. Los hallazgos muestran que, si bien la transición mejoró las condiciones laborales, la seguridad y la dignidad social, también condujo a menores ingresos y menor autonomía. El estudio destaca el complejo proceso de formalización del trabajo informal y ofrece perspectivas cruciales para las políticas públicas, enfatizando la importancia de sistemas integrales de apoyo que aborden tanto las

ventajas como los desafíos de la integración cooperativa y garanticen un respaldo gubernamental suficiente para la gestión sostenible de residuos.

Palabras clave: recicladores, cooperativas, análisis temático, economía informal, inclusión social, Brasil

1 Introduction

Waste pickers constitute a critical yet marginalized workforce in the Global South, performing essential environmental services under conditions of severe social exclusion and economic precarity (Dias, 2016; Medina, 2007). In Brazil, recent census data estimate approximately 281,000 individuals engaged in waste picking activities (Bouvier & Dias, 2021), although the Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis (MNCR) suggests figures may reach 800,000 when accounting for unregistered informal workers (MNCR, 2023). These workers are responsible for approximately 90% of all recycled material in the country, yet remain among the most vulnerable and stigmatized segments of the labor force (IPEA, 2013; Gutberlet, 2018).

The Estrutural landfill, located approximately 15 kilometers from the planned center of Brasília in the administrative region of the Cidade Estrutural, operated as Latin America's largest open dump for over five decades (1960-2018). At its peak, the site received over 2,000 tons of waste daily from the Federal District, serving as the primary source of livelihood for an estimated 2,500 to 3,000 waste pickers and their families (SLU-DF, 2017; Cruvinel et al., 2019). The landfill's proximity to Brazil's capital city – a paradox of extreme poverty adjacent to the seat of federal power – made it a particularly visible symbol of social inequality and the failures of urban waste management policy (Lima & Mancini, 2017). Its definitive closure in January 2018, following years of environmental litigation and mounting public health concerns,

represented one of the largest forced transitions from informal to formal waste management in Latin American history, directly affecting thousands of workers and their dependents.

The closure triggered a complex process of formalization in which former landfill workers were directed toward cooperative structures established with varying degrees of governmental support. This transition is particularly significant because it represents a concrete test case for Brazil's National Solid Waste Policy (PNRS, Law 12.305/2010), which explicitly mandates the social and economic inclusion of waste pickers through cooperative models (Brasil, 2010). Understanding how this policy commitment translates into lived experience is essential for evaluating formalization strategies across the country.

This study employs reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022) to examine the lived experiences of 20 waste pickers who transitioned from informal work at the Estrutural landfill to participation in cooperative organizations across the Federal District. The central research question guiding this investigation is: *How do waste pickers experience and make sense of the transition from informal landfill work to formal cooperative structures, and what are the implications of these experiences for public policy and cooperative development?* Specifically, we address four subsidiary questions: (1) How do participants characterize their working conditions and social experiences before and after the transition? (2) What benefits and challenges do they perceive in cooperative participation? (3) How has the transition affected their family dynamics, social relationships, and sense of identity? (4) What do their experiences reveal about the adequacy of current policy frameworks for waste picker inclusion?

By centering the voices and critical perspectives of waste pickers themselves, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of formalization processes in the informal economy. The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a literature review covering the historical, socioeconomic, and theoretical dimensions of waste picker studies; Section 3 describes the methodological approach, including sampling, data collection, and analytical

procedures; Section 4 presents the results, organized around four overarching themes identified through the analysis; Section 5 discusses the findings in dialogue with existing literature and their policy implications; and Section 6 offers concluding reflections.

2 Literature Review

This literature review summarizes current knowledge about waste pickers in Brazil, focusing on their shift to cooperative models. It explores the socio-economic, health, and environmental aspects of their work and considers how cooperatives enhance their livelihoods and social standing.

2.1 Historical and Political Background

Waste picking has a long history in the Global South as a survival strategy for marginalized populations (Medina, 2005; Dias, 2016). In Brazil, waste picking was recognized as an occupational category in 2002 under the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO code 5192-05), an important step in acknowledging waste pickers' contributions (Bouvier & Dias, 2021). The National Solid Waste Policy (PNRS, 2010) established a framework for integrating cooperatives and associations into municipal selective collection programs (Besen et al., 2014), though implementation has been uneven due to challenges in funding, political will, and institutional capacity (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Miranda et al., 2020).

The political context has significantly shaped waste pickers' opportunities. During the Workers' Party (PT) governments (2003-2016), policies such as the Pro-Catador Program (Decree 7.405/2010) advanced the recognition and support of waste pickers (Gutberlet et al., 2013), but subsequent political changes created uncertainties about their continuation (Barford & Ahmad, 2021). The Estrutural landfill, established informally in the 1960s alongside Brasilia's founding, grew to become Latin America's largest open dump. Its closure in 2018 was mandated under the PNRS after decades of environmental degradation and health hazards (Cruvinel et al., 2019; Lima & Mancini, 2017).

2.2 Socio-economic Profile of Waste Pickers

Studies on waste pickers in Brazil reveal a diverse population with varied socio-economic characteristics (Coletto & Bisschop, 2017; Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017). A large proportion are women (Cruvinel et al., 2019; Hartmann et al., 2022), often heads of households with low levels of education (Cruvinel et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2020). In general, they come from marginalized communities and have limited access to formal employment opportunities (Schenck et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2020). Their entry into waste collection is often motivated by economic necessity, providing a means of survival in the face of poverty and unemployment (Medina, 2005; Schenck et al., 2016). Motivations and pathways to waste collection vary according to individual circumstances and local contexts (Coletto & Bisschop, 2017; Schenck et al., 2016).

2.3 Health and Safety Issues

The informal nature of waste collection exposes workers to significant health and safety risks (Gutberlet et al., 2013; Cruvinel et al., 2019). Exposure to hazardous materials, including infectious waste, sharp objects, and toxic chemicals, poses a serious threat to the health of these individuals (Gutberlet et al., 2013; Gutberlet & Uddin, 2017). Musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory problems, and infectious diseases are common among waste pickers (Cruvinel et al., 2019; Gutberlet et al., 2013), aggravated by a lack of access to protective measures (Gutberlet et al., 2013; Gutberlet & Uddin, 2017). The transition to cooperative structures can help mitigate some of these risks (Gutberlet et al., 2013; Buch et al., 2021) through better working conditions, access to training, and collective bargaining power (Miranda et al., 2020; Silva & Bolson, 2018). However, cooperatives can also face challenges in providing adequate safety measures, especially those with limited resources or weak governance (Marello & Helwege, 2018; Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017).

2.4 Social Dimensions and Stigma

Waste pickers often face social stigma and marginalization (Medina, 2005; Barford & Ahmad, 2021), as they are perceived as low-status workers who engage in undesirable tasks (Colombijn & Morbidini, 2017). This stigma can affect their self-esteem, social relationships, and access to opportunities (Barford & Ahmad, 2021; Dias, 2016). The transition to cooperatives can help challenge these negative perceptions by providing a framework for collective action, improving social recognition, and fostering a sense of community (Silva & Bolson, 2018; Dias, 2016). However, overcoming entrenched prejudices and reaching full social inclusion continues to be a significant and ongoing challenge (Barford & Ahmad, 2021; Dias, 2016).

2.5 Economy and Livelihoods

Waste collection is a vital source of income for many people (Schenck et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2020), but the economic returns are often low and highly variable (Yu et al., 2020; Viljoen et al., 2016). Informal recyclers often lack bargaining power when negotiating prices with intermediaries, which results in low pay for their work (Medina, 2005; Viljoen et al., 2016). Cooperatives can improve the economic situation of waste pickers by increasing their collective bargaining power, providing access to markets, and improving efficiency (Miranda et al., 2020; Buch et al., 2021). Cooperative members generally have higher incomes and greater financial security compared to individual waste pickers (Miranda et al., 2020; Silva & Bolson, 2018), but the economic benefits of cooperative membership can vary considerably depending on the success and governance of the cooperative (Marello & Helwege, 2018; Barford & Ahmad, 2021).

2.6 Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches

2.6.1 Informal Economy and Precarious Work

Waste collection exists within the broader context of the informal economy (Banks et al., 2019; Coletto & Bisschop, 2017), which is characterized by precarious work, lack of social protection, and vulnerability to exploitation (Hartmann et al., 2022; Barford & Ahmad, 2021). Sociological

and economic theories on informal labor markets provide valuable approaches to understanding the conditions under which waste pickers operate (Banks et al., 2019; Ogando et al., 2017). Concepts such as social stratification, marginalization, and the informal-formal continuum are relevant for analyzing the socio-economic position of waste pickers and their limited access to social mobility (Banks et al., 2019; Viljoen et al., 2016).

2.6.2 Empowerment, Social Inclusion, and Cooperative Models

Cooperative models offer a potential way to empower marginalized groups (Buch et al., 2021; Gutberlet & Carenzo, 2020), promote social inclusion, and enhance collective agency (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Dias, 2016). Research on cooperatives and solidarity economies provides useful information on how these structures can improve the livelihoods and social position of waste pickers (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Buch et al., 2021). Concepts such as mutual aid, shared responsibility, and collective bargaining are essential to understanding the transformative potential of cooperatives (Ziegler et al., 2023; Buch et al., 2021).

2.6.3 Critical Social Theory and Participatory Approaches

Equally relevant contributions come from critical social theories, such as Freirean pedagogy (Cruz, 2021; Gutberlet et al., 2020), by focusing on the transformative potential of cooperatives from the perspective of waste pickers themselves (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Gutberlet & Carenzo, 2020). Such theories emphasize participatory approaches, empowering marginalized groups to participate in shaping their own development and awareness (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Dias, 2016). Concepts such as environmental justice and grassroots movements are also important for understanding the role of waste pickers in defending their rights and improving environmental conditions (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Gutberlet, 2018).

2.7 Synthesis of the Main Themes of Existing Research

The literature review reveals six interconnected themes. First, *socio-economic vulnerability* is a consistent finding, with waste pickers earning low and unstable incomes under conditions of

informality and lack of social protections (Viljoen et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2020; Banks et al., 2019; Dias, 2016). Second, *health and safety risks* are pervasive, including occupational injuries, respiratory problems, and mental health challenges compounded by lack of access to healthcare (Cruvinel et al., 2019; Hartmann et al., 2022). Third, *social stigma* significantly impacts waste pickers' self-esteem, social relationships, and access to public services (Schenck et al., 2016; Banks et al., 2019). Fourth, *cooperative models* offer potential improvements in working conditions and social recognition, though challenges related to governance and institutional support persist (Miranda et al., 2020; Buch et al., 2021; Gutberlet & Carenzo, 2020). Fifth, *policy and institutional dimensions* are increasingly recognized as crucial in shaping waste pickers' access to resources and rights (Dias, 2016; Barford & Ahmad, 2021). Sixth, *environmental justice perspectives* connect waste pickers' struggles to broader questions of social inequality and disproportionate environmental burdens (Ziegler et al., 2023; Buch et al., 2021).

2.8 Gaps and Future Research Directions

2.8.1 Issues Under Debate and Limitations of Existing Studies

Although the existing literature sheds light on aspects of waste pickers' experiences, it does have significant gaps. Methodological limitations, such as the preponderance of cross-sectional studies (Cruvinel et al., 2019), prevent a comprehensive understanding of long-term trends and the impact of interventions over time. The lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to assess the sustained effects of cooperative models on the livelihoods and social inclusion of waste pickers (Cruvinel et al., 2019; Silva & Bolson, 2018). In addition, many studies focus on specific aspects of waste collection without adequately integrating the social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Ferronato & Torretta, 2019; Gonçalves et al., 2018). Conceptual gaps include a limited understanding of cooperative governance structures, the intersectional challenges faced by waste pickers, i.e., simultaneously considering race, gender, and age

(Ogando et al., 2017; Barford & Ahmad, 2021), as well as the long-term sustainability of cooperative arrangements (Marello & Helwege, 2018; Barford & Ahmad, 2021).

The present study addresses several of these limitations directly. While it does not constitute a longitudinal investigation per se, it captures participants' retrospective accounts spanning multiple decades of landfill work and several years of cooperative experience, thereby offering a temporal perspective on the transition process that is absent from cross-sectional designs. The use of reflexive thematic analysis enables an integrated examination of social, economic, and subjective dimensions of the transition within each participant's narrative, rather than isolating discrete variables. Furthermore, the study's sample composition – predominantly female heads of household with diverse educational backgrounds and cooperative affiliations – provides a window into gendered and intersectional aspects of waste picker formalization, even though a dedicated intersectional analysis exceeds the present scope.

2.8.2 Relevance of This Study

These research gaps highlight the need for qualitative approaches that focus on the voices and experiences of waste pickers as they navigate transitions to formalized structures. The closure of the Estrutural landfill offers a particularly compelling empirical context for such investigation: as the largest open dump in Latin America, its closure affected a uniquely large population of workers, and the subsequent establishment of multiple cooperatives across the Federal District created natural variation in organizational models and outcomes. This study's use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022) is specifically suited to capturing the complexity and nuance of participants' lived experiences during this transition, generating insights that survey-based or exclusively quantitative approaches would miss. By centering waste pickers' own interpretive frameworks, the study moves beyond documenting external conditions to understanding how workers themselves make sense of structural transformations in their working lives.

2.8.3 Positioning of the Study

This literature review has highlighted the significant role of waste pickers in Brazil's solid waste management system and the complexities of their transition to cooperative models. Existing literature reveals substantial socioeconomic vulnerabilities, health risks, and social stigma associated with informal waste collection (Hartmann et al., 2022; Cruvinel et al., 2019). Cooperative structures offer a potential avenue for improving livelihoods and promoting social inclusion (Miranda et al., 2020; Buch et al., 2021), but challenges related to governance, access to resources, and political support persist (Marello & Helwege, 2018; Barford & Ahmad, 2021). A central methodological commitment of this study is to take seriously the critical capacity of waste pickers as social actors. Drawing on the pragmatic sociology of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006), we recognize that ordinary actors are not merely passive subjects of structural forces but possess genuine competencies for evaluation, critique, and justification. Waste pickers engage in sophisticated assessments of their working conditions, weigh competing values (autonomy versus security, income versus dignity), and articulate coherent justifications for their choices. This perspective distinguishes our approach from studies that treat waste pickers exclusively as objects of external analysis or as recipients of policy interventions. The reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022) operationalizes this commitment by requiring that the researcher's analytical engagement with data be transparent and that the interpretive process remain attuned to participants' own frameworks of meaning-making, rather than imposing predetermined theoretical categories.

By centering the voices of waste pickers and employing this reflexive and critically informed approach, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the transformative potential of cooperatives in addressing social and environmental challenges in Brazil's solid waste management system. Findings can inform policymaking, cooperative

development, as well as advocacy efforts, leading to more equitable and sustainable waste management practices (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Dias, 2016).

3 Methods

3.1 Thematic Analysis Methodology

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative research method designed to identify, analyze, and report patterns of meaning within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2022). Thematic analysis has gained widespread recognition as a flexible and accessible method for analyzing qualitative data, with particular strengths in capturing the complexity and nuance of lived experiences (Naeem et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2022). The method involves six iterative phases: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Reflexive thematic analysis, specifically, emphasizes researcher subjectivity and reflexivity as central to the analytical process, recognizing that themes are actively constructed by researchers through their engagement with data rather than simply emerging from it (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022). This approach aligns with qualitative research values that acknowledge the interpretive nature of knowledge production and the importance of researcher positionality in shaping analytical outcomes (Byrne, 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Recent scholarship has emphasized that data saturation--the point at which no new themes or information emerge from additional data collection--remains a critical concept for determining sample adequacy in qualitative research (Naeem et al., 2024; Guest et al., 2020). Empirical studies demonstrate that thematic saturation can be achieved with relatively small sample sizes, typically ranging from 9-17 interviews for studies with homogeneous populations and narrowly defined objectives (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021; Guest et al., 2020). However, contemporary understanding recognizes saturation as a context-dependent, subjective process that requires

systematic analysis rather than simple declaration (Saunders et al., 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

3.2 Research Design and Data Collection

This study utilized a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore the lived experiences of waste pickers who transitioned from the Estrutural landfill to cooperative work arrangements. The research was conducted in Brazil's Federal District, where the Estrutural landfill operated from 1960 to 2018, serving as Latin America's largest open dump and supporting thousands of waste picker families.

Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted in June 2025 with waste pickers who had direct experience working at the Estrutural landfill and subsequently joined various cooperative organizations. Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were conducted in Portuguese by trained researchers familiar with the local context and waste picker community. The interview guide explored participants' experiences before, during, and after the landfill closure, focusing on working conditions, economic changes, social relationships, family impacts, and perspectives on cooperative participation.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling guided by three explicit criteria: (1) direct experience working at the Estrutural landfill prior to its closure; (2) current or recent membership in a cooperative organization in the Federal District; and (3) willingness to provide detailed accounts of both landfill and cooperative experiences. Initial contact was established through cooperative leadership and the Centcoop network, which coordinates cooperative activities in the Federal District. To ensure diversity of perspectives, recruitment deliberately sought variation across cooperative affiliation (nine cooperatives represented), gender (12 women, 8 men), age cohort (ranging from 27 to 70 years), and duration of landfill experience (from a few years to over two decades). This strategy aimed to capture the range of transition experiences rather than to achieve statistical representativeness.

Participants' trajectories varied considerably: some began working at the Estrutural in the 1980s-1990s, while others arrived in the 2000s-2010s. The majority worked there for 10 to 25 years. Following the closure in January 2018, most entered cooperative structures within the first year. At the time of interviews, participants had approximately six to seven years of cooperative experience. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). All participants provided informed consent, and the study received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. Data analysis followed the six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). During the familiarization phase, repeated readings revealed that participants were not merely recounting experiences but actively evaluating their working conditions using criteria of dignity, autonomy, and fairness. This critical reflexivity shaped the analytical approach: initial coding was generated inductively from participants' own evaluative frameworks rather than from deductive categories derived from the literature. Throughout the process, the research team maintained reflexive journals documenting interpretive decisions, and regular discussions ensured that the final thematic structure reflected participants' perspectives. This was particularly important in constructing Theme 4 (Social and Family Transformation), where the team initially underestimated the centrality of children's educational opportunities in participants' accounts.

4 Results

4.1 Participant Demographics

The study included 20 participants (12 female, eight male) ranging in age from 27 to 70 years (mean age: 49.1 years). Participants represented diverse educational backgrounds, with the majority having incomplete primary education (n=8), while others ranged from non-literate (n=2) to having incomplete higher education (n=1). The sample included participants from nine

different cooperatives currently operating in the Federal District: COOPERE (n=9), COORTRAP (n=2), COOPERNOES (n=2), COOPERFÉ (n=3), and individual representatives from CETELS, COOPERCAP, CENTCOP, and ACOPLANO.

Participants' time working at the Estrutural landfill varied considerably, from a few years to over two decades, with many beginning their work there during the 1990s and 2000s. The majority were heads of households responsible for supporting multiple family members, with the number of children ranging from one to six. Family circumstances varied, including singles (n=5), married individuals (n=9), and divorced participants (n=6). Current monthly incomes in cooperatives were reported as significantly lower than previous earnings at the landfill, though participants valued the improved working conditions and social benefits.

4.2 Thematic Analysis Results

Table 1 presents a summary of the four overarching themes, their constituent codes, and the frequency of occurrence across participants.

Table 1 – Themes, codes, and frequency of occurrence across participants (N=20)

Theme	Code	n
1. Landfill Work Experiences	Survival Necessity	15
	Unhealthy Landfill Conditions	18
	Risks and Accidents	16
	Violence and Criminality	12
	Social Discrimination	14
	Higher Landfill Income	13
	Individual Autonomous Work	11
2. Transition Process	Impactful Closure	17
	Difficult Cooperative Transition	14
3. Cooperative Work Experiences	Better Structural Conditions	16
	Dignity and Self-esteem	12
	Organization and Schedules	10
	Social Security	8
	Limited Government Support	15
	Cooperative Operational Challenges	11
4. Social and Family Transformation	Improved Family Relations	9
	Children's Education	7

	Family Sustenance	12
	Growth Hopes	13
	Current Social Recognition	8

Source: authors (2025).

The analysis revealed four overarching themes that capture the complexity of waste pickers' transition experiences: (1) Landfill Work Experiences, (2) Transition Process, (3) Cooperative Work Experiences, and (4) Social and Family Transformation.

Theme 1: Landfill Work Experiences

The first theme encompasses participants' complex and contradictory relationship with landfill work, revealing both the harsh realities and unexpected advantages of informal waste picking. This theme emerged through seven interconnected codes that illuminate the multifaceted nature of working at Latin America's largest open dump.

The harsh reality for participants was that landfill work was their only viable livelihood option. The code Survival Necessity, seen in the accounts of 15 participants, shows how structural economic constraints pushed them into waste picking. As E01 clearly stated: "I was forced by circumstances," while E11 described the desperation that led to the landfill: "I went to the landfill out of necessity. I had no job, couldn't find anything to work." E15 echoed this feeling: "I came out of necessity, because I had no income," emphasizing how waste picking became the last resort for families struggling socially and economically.

The physical conditions at the landfill were universally described as deplorable, with the code Unhealthy Landfill Conditions appearing in 18 participants' narratives --- the most prevalent experience across all interviews. Participants described working in environments characterized by contamination, toxic gases, and complete lack of basic infrastructure. E01 vividly recalled: "The dirt, the lack of hygiene, all of that was very difficult for me," while E03 described the overwhelming sensory assault: "It was very smelly. There was a strong gas." The degrading nature of these conditions was further emphasized by E14's description of the chorume

(leachate): "Leachate was in the open air; when I thought I was going to step on the ground, it was leachate."

Beyond unhealthy conditions, participants faced constant life-threatening dangers, as captured in the code Risks and Accidents, which came from 16 participants' accounts. The landfill environment exposed workers to machinery accidents, being buried under waste, and fatal injuries from sharp objects. E10 recounted a particularly traumatic incident: "A truck arrived, and everyone was working around it (...) When the truck started moving, it ran over several people." The frequency and severity of these incidents are further illustrated by E12's account: "I saw a truck running over a friend and a child; they didn't survive." These experiences reveal the extreme vulnerability of workers operating in an environment where safety measures were completely absent.

The landfill also served as a site of extreme violence and criminal activity, documented through the code Violence and Criminality, which appeared in 12 participants' testimonies. E09 witnessed horrific acts of violence: "I saw a man go up with a 5-liter gasoline container (...) He set the boy on fire and left him to burn." Even more disturbing were accounts of systematic violence, as E11 reported: "There were reports of people being thrown into 'microwaves', which were manholes with fire 24 hours a day." These testimonies reveal how the unregulated, informal nature of the landfill created conditions where extreme criminality could flourish unchecked.

The social stigma associated with landfill work profoundly affected participants' interactions with broader society, reflected in the code Social Discrimination, present in 14 participants' accounts. E01 captured this stigmatization succinctly: "For many people, we are the trash too." This discrimination was particularly painful for participants' children, as E19 recalled: "In my time, it was very sad at school (...) they called me Estrututtrash." The stigma extended to essential services, with E12 describing healthcare discrimination: "Doctors didn't want to see

me. I had to go to Goiás with a sick child." This systematic discrimination reinforced the social marginalization of waste picker families.

Paradoxically, despite these harsh conditions, participants consistently emphasized the economic advantages of landfill work through the code Higher Landfill Income, which emerged from 13 participants' testimonies. E01 acknowledged: "There at the landfill, if I wanted, I earned more," while E12 described how migration to the landfill dramatically improved her financial situation: "The income I had in Goiás was small. At the Estrutural landfill, my income multiplied." Some participants earned substantial daily amounts, as E12 reported: "I earned around R\$150.00 to R\$200.00 per day." This economic dimension creates ongoing tension in participants' evaluations of their transition to cooperatives.

Finally, participants highly valued the autonomy and flexibility inherent in landfill work, captured through the code Individual Autonomous Work, present in 11 participants' accounts. E01 fondly remembered: "At the landfill, you made your own day, your own schedule," while E06 described it as: "It's an opportunity for you to define your own schedule and your production." This autonomy allowed workers to balance income generation with family responsibilities, as E17 noted: "There I decided when to enter and leave." This control over their work represented a form of agency that participants would later find constrained in cooperative structures.

Theme 2: Transition Process

The second theme captures the profound disruption and emotional trauma associated with the landfill closure and the challenging adaptation to cooperative structures. This theme encompasses two critical moments in participants' experiences that fundamentally altered their working lives and economic security.

The closure of the Estrutural landfill in 2018 represented a watershed moment that affected virtually all participants, captured through the code Impactful Closure, which emerged from 17

participants' accounts. The announcement of the closure created widespread shock and anxiety among waste picker families who had depended on the landfill for decades. E01 described the initial reaction: "When they said it was really going to end, it was a shock," while E13 articulated the universal concern: "My biggest concern, and that of every waste picker, was what we would do, how we would feed ourselves." The closure left thousands of families without their primary income source, as E19 emphasized: "It was a blow, I was left without any resources." E03's simple statement captures the collective impact: "We would all suffer."

The subsequent adaptation to cooperative structures proved equally challenging, documented through the code Difficult Cooperative Transition, present in 14 participants' narratives. The transition required fundamental changes in work culture, moving from individual autonomy to collective responsibility and shared decision-making. E05 acknowledged: "For me, it was a very complicated transition," while E03 highlighted the most significant challenge: "The financial part was very difficult, because there we earned much more." The cultural adaptation was particularly difficult, as E15 explained: "It was challenging, because each individual was accustomed to working autonomously." Some participants felt overwhelmed by the new demands, as E10 noted: "It was difficult. People just want me to work incessantly." This transition required not only practical adaptations but also psychological adjustment to entirely different ways of organizing work and distributing income.

Theme 3: Cooperative Work Experiences

The third theme reveals the complex reality of cooperative participation, encompassing both significant improvements in working conditions and dignity alongside persistent operational and economic challenges. This theme demonstrates how formalization brought important benefits while creating new constraints and difficulties.

The most universally appreciated aspect of cooperative work was the dramatic improvement in physical working conditions, captured through the code Better Structural Conditions, which

appeared in 16 participants' accounts. Participants consistently contrasted the clean, safe environment of cooperatives with the hazardous conditions they had endured at the landfill. E01 celebrated this transformation: "Here we have dignity. Everything is clean, fragrant, sanitized." The provision of basic infrastructure represented a fundamental improvement in their working lives: "Today we have bathrooms, showers, cafeteria, sink, uniforms, PPE." E06 highlighted the improved working rhythm: "There's a break at noon during lunch time," while E05 emphasized the safety improvements: "Here, we work protected from accidents." These infrastructure improvements represent fundamental gains in occupational health and safety that participants deeply value.

Beyond physical improvements, participants experienced significant psychological and social benefits through enhanced dignity and self-esteem, documented in the code Dignity and Self-esteem from 12 participants' accounts. E05 reflected on the broader impact: "I feel better. So you learn many things, you live with other people," while E03 described improved peace of mind: "I feel better, don't I? Better, because I already sleep more peacefully." The transformation was sometimes dramatic, as E14 emphasized: "My identity and self-esteem changed drastically, by 100%." E11 noted how family perceptions changed: "Today, my family sees me differently." This represents a crucial dimension of the cooperative experience that extends beyond material improvements to encompass psychological well-being and social recognition.

The structured nature of cooperative work, while providing stability, also constrained the autonomy that participants had valued in landfill work. The code Organization and Schedules, present in 10 participants' accounts, reflects this institutionalization of work arrangements. E01 explained the new reality: "In the cooperative, you have responsibilities. There are schedules. There are rules," while E07 contrasted this with previous flexibility: "Here we have our work schedule exactly right." E06 noted the necessity of organization: "The cooperative has to work

in an organized way," while E07 emphasized the structured routine: "It's very different. There are entry and exit times." This institutionalization brings both benefits in terms of predictability and constraints in terms of personal autonomy.

One of the most significant advantages of cooperative membership was access to formal social protection, captured through the code Social Security in 8 participants' accounts. E05 valued this security: "Social security, the place where I am sheltered is very good," while E12 emphasized the contrast with landfill work: "The cooperative has security, because we pay social security." E13 highlighted the universal coverage: "Every worker who works here is insured by social security," while E14 noted how this had never been considered during landfill work: "At the landfill, I never considered paying social security." This formalization provides crucial long-term security and recognition as formal workers with rights and protections.

However, participants consistently expressed frustration with inadequate government support for cooperative development, documented through the code Limited Government Support, which appeared in 15 participants' testimonies. E01 made a direct appeal: "We don't have government help, as we should have," while E09 emphasized the absence of assistance: "I never received any government aid." The inadequacy of support was particularly evident during the transition, as E01 noted: "The cooperatives are asking for help. The government needs to look out for us." E08 criticized the government's neglect: "The government didn't care about the waste pickers." This limitation significantly affects the sustainability and effectiveness of cooperative operations.

Finally, cooperatives face significant operational and financial challenges that constrain their development and limit income generation, captured through the code Cooperative Operational Challenges in 11 participants' accounts. E01 described persistent equipment problems: "It's the machines. The conveyor belt keeps breaking. The motors are old, tired," while E13 identified the central challenge: "The cooperative's challenge is to obtain sufficient resources to acquire

machinery." E18 emphasized the financial burden: "There are many expenses. We have many expenses," while E16 highlighted contractual pressures: "The big challenge for me is reaching the contract target with SLU." These operational constraints limit the economic viability and growth potential of cooperatives, creating ongoing frustrations for participants.

Theme 4: Social and Family Transformation

The fourth theme captures the broader social impacts of the transition, revealing how the shift from landfill to cooperative work affected family relationships, educational opportunities, and community recognition. This theme demonstrates how the transformation extended beyond individual workers to encompass families and communities.

Many participants experienced positive changes in their family relationships following the transition to cooperative work, documented through the code Improved Family Relations in 9 participants' accounts. E01 reported a significant improvement: "The relationship with family improved. Nobody criticizes anymore," while E08 described changing perceptions: "The family comes to understand that it's common work, it changes the way of thinking." E09 noted community recognition: "My neighbor considered it positive that I had gotten a job," while E05 simply stated: "For the better." These improvements reflect reduced stigma and greater social acceptance of cooperative work compared to landfill activities.

Education emerged as a crucial pathway for intergenerational mobility, with participants investing heavily in their children's educational opportunities, captured through the code Children's Education in 7 participants' accounts. E01 proudly shared how landfill income had enabled educational investment: "With what I earned at the landfill, I paid for my daughter's college," while E04 reflected on the broader impact: "So much so that today I have children who graduated thanks to work at the landfill." Participants expressed strong aspirations for their children's futures, as E13 stated: "I wish my son doesn't have to work here, that he has a better profession." E18 articulated this hope: "My dream is to see him in college." Education

represents the primary strategy for ensuring that children can escape the constraints of waste picking work.

The centrality of waste picking for family survival was emphasized throughout participants' accounts, documented through the code Family Sustenance in 12 participants' testimonies. E07 described waste picking in fundamental terms: "It was our daily bread," while E05 reflected on its role in child-rearing: "It was there that I raised them daily." E04 emphasized the ongoing importance: "This is the work that feeds our family," while E10 highlighted the parental responsibility, particularly for single mothers: "I was father and mother to my children." This underscores the critical importance of waste picking work for family survival and well-being, making the economic challenges of cooperative transition particularly significant.

Despite current difficulties, participants expressed strong hopes for cooperative development and improved working conditions, captured through the code Growth Hopes in 13 participants' accounts. E01 expressed financial aspirations: "I wish the cooperative would grow financially," while E05 combined personal and collective hopes: "The cooperative, I want it to grow more each day" and "I aspire to a better future and improvement in working conditions." E08 emphasized collective organization: "I want everyone to get organized." These hopes reflect ongoing commitment to the cooperative model despite current challenges and demonstrate participants' active engagement in envisioning better futures.

Finally, participants noted changing social perceptions of their work, with cooperative membership bringing greater recognition and respect, documented through the code Current Social Recognition in 8 participants' accounts. E12 described improved social access: "Nowadays, for working in the cooperative, I am more recognized. Doors open more," while E05 noted broader social appreciation: "Many people also see how they say that the waste picker is known, is valued." E18 characterized the work as: "It's more recognized work," while E17 observed: "Today, the way people look at me in the cooperative has changed a lot." This

recognition represents an important social dimension of the formalization process, though it coexists with ongoing challenges and constraints.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study reveal the profound complexity of the transition from informal landfill work to formal cooperative structures, highlighting both significant achievements and persistent challenges in waste picker formalization processes. The experiences documented here provide crucial insights into the lived reality of policy implementation and the multifaceted impacts of closing Latin America's largest open dump.

5.1 The Paradox of Formalization

Our findings reveal a fundamental paradox in the formalization process: while participants universally valued the improved working conditions, dignity, and social recognition associated with cooperative membership, they simultaneously mourned the loss of economic advantages and autonomy that characterized landfill work. This paradox aligns with broader literature on informal economy formalization, which consistently finds that formalization processes involve complex trade-offs rather than unambiguous improvements (Banks et al., 2019; Coletto & Bisschop, 2017).

The economic dimension of this paradox is particularly striking. Participants consistently reported earning significantly more at the landfill--often two to three times their current cooperative income--reflecting the direct market access and individual autonomy that characterized informal work. This finding challenges simplistic assumptions about the benefits of formalization and highlights the need for policy approaches that address the economic sustainability of cooperative models (Miranda et al., 2020; Silva & Bolson, 2018).

The autonomy dimension reflects deeper issues about work organization and control. The flexibility and self-determination that participants valued in landfill work--being able to set their own schedules, work independently, and directly control their earnings--represents a form

of worker agency that is often overlooked in discussions of informal work (Hartmann et al., 2022). The transition to structured cooperative arrangements, while providing security and dignity, necessarily constrains this autonomy, creating ongoing tension for participants.

5.2 Dignity, Recognition, and Social Inclusion

Despite economic challenges, participants consistently emphasized the transformative impact of cooperative work on their sense of dignity and social recognition. The provision of basic infrastructure--bathrooms, clean working spaces, protective equipment--represented fundamental improvements in working conditions that participants described in terms of dignity and humanity. This aligns with critical social theory perspectives on the importance of recognition and respect in addressing marginalization (Gutberlet et al., 2020; Dias, 2016).

The reduction in social discrimination represents a particularly significant achievement. Participants' accounts of being called "trash" or denied medical services while working at the landfill illustrate the profound stigmatization faced by informal waste workers. The improved social recognition associated with cooperative membership--being seen as legitimate workers with formal contracts and social benefits--represents an important step toward social inclusion, though discrimination persists in many contexts (Barford & Ahmad, 2021).

The impact on children and families deserves particular attention. The reduction in school-based discrimination experienced by participants' children, combined with improved family relationships and reduced stress, demonstrates how formalization benefits extend beyond individual workers to encompass broader family and community well-being. This intergenerational dimension is crucial for breaking cycles of poverty and marginalization (Ogando et al., 2017).

5.3 Structural Challenges and Policy Implications

The persistent challenges identified by participants point to fundamental structural issues in Brazil's approach to waste picker integration. Limited government support--both financial and

technical--undermines the sustainability of cooperative models and perpetuates the precarious conditions that formalization was intended to address. Participants' frustrations with broken equipment, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient contract values reflect broader challenges in implementing the National Solid Waste Policy's commitments to waste picker inclusion (Marello & Helwege, 2018; Alfaia et al., 2017).

The operational challenges faced by cooperatives reveal the inadequacy of current support structures. Cooperatives are expected to function as formal businesses while serving marginalized populations with limited resources and technical capacity. The frequent equipment breakdowns, high operational costs, and difficulty meeting contract requirements described by participants suggest that current policy approaches underestimate the support required for successful cooperative development (Buch et al., 2021).

The persistence of violence and criminality in participants' accounts of landfill work--including horrific descriptions of murder, torture, and body disposal--underscores the extreme conditions that made formalization not just beneficial but essential for worker safety and human rights. However, the fact that these conditions persisted for decades without adequate government intervention reflects broader patterns of state neglect toward marginalized populations (Gutberlet, 2018).

5.4 Individual and Collective Rights of Waste Pickers

The experiences documented in this study must be understood within the broader framework of waste pickers' rights as recognized in Brazilian law and policy. At the individual level, the transition from landfill work to cooperatives represents a shift from a condition of near-complete absence of labor protections to at least partial access to social security, occupational safety standards, and formal recognition as workers. Brazil's National Solid Waste Policy (PNRS, Law 12.305/2010) explicitly recognizes waste pickers' role in reverse logistics and mandates their integration into municipal solid waste management systems (Brasil, 2010). The

PNRS, together with Decree 7.404/2010, established cooperatives and associations of waste pickers as preferred partners for selective collection contracts, thereby creating a legal basis for their economic inclusion.

However, participants' accounts reveal a significant gap between the rights enshrined in legislation and their effective realization. The persistent reports of broken equipment, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient contract values suggest that the right to dignified working conditions, while formally acknowledged, remains incompletely implemented. From a collective rights perspective, the cooperative model itself embodies principles of self-management, democratic governance, and solidarity economy recognized in Brazil's cooperative legislation (Law 5.764/1971) and in the broader framework of the solidarity economy movement (Singer, 2002; Gaiger, 2013). Participants' descriptions of organizational challenges within cooperatives – tensions between individual autonomy and collective discipline, difficulties in democratic decision-making, and uneven participation – reflect the inherent complexity of exercising collective governance rights among populations with limited prior experience in formal organizational structures.

The intersectional dimension of these rights deserves emphasis. The predominance of women in the sample (60%), many serving as heads of household, highlights how gender mediates access to and experience of both labor rights and cooperative governance. Women's disproportionate representation in waste picking work, combined with their domestic responsibilities, creates specific challenges for full participation in cooperative structures that have been insufficiently addressed in current policy frameworks (Ogando et al., 2017; Dias, 2016).

5.5 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on these findings, several key recommendations emerge for improving waste picker formalization processes:

Economic Sustainability: Thirteen participants reported earning two to three times more at the landfill than in cooperatives, pointing to a fundamental design flaw: cooperative contract values do not compensate for the loss of direct market access. Policy must address this through improved contract terms reflecting the environmental value of cooperative services, payment for environmental services (PES) mechanisms, and extended producer responsibility programs channeling resources directly to cooperatives.

Comprehensive Support Systems: Fifteen participants reported limited government support, describing initial assistance followed by withdrawal of backing. Equipment breakdowns across all nine cooperatives suggest support models treat cooperative formation as a one-time intervention. Effective formalization requires sustained technical assistance: equipment maintenance, management capacity-building, and financial literacy education tailored to members' educational profiles.

Infrastructure Investment: Adequate physical infrastructure--including properly equipped processing facilities, transportation systems, and storage capacity--is essential for cooperative success. Government investment in cooperative infrastructure should be viewed as public investment in waste management systems rather than charity for marginalized populations.

Bridging Individual and Collective Models: Eleven participants valued the autonomy of landfill work – setting schedules, working independently, controlling earnings. This challenges the assumption that collective models are universally preferred and suggests exploring hybrid forms: individual productivity incentives within cooperative frameworks, flexible scheduling for family responsibilities, and tiered membership models.

Health and Safety: Eighteen participants described unhealthy landfill conditions, and 16 reported direct exposure to hospital waste, sharp objects, and toxic substances. Current cooperative members require ongoing occupational health monitoring and targeted programs

addressing legacy effects of prolonged landfill exposure, including respiratory conditions and psychological trauma.

Social Integration: Fourteen participants reported discrimination as landfill workers, including being denied medical services. While cooperative membership has reduced stigma, discrimination persists. Effective integration requires public education recognizing waste pickers' environmental contributions and training for healthcare providers and educators to address discriminatory attitudes.

5.6 Broader Implications for Informal Economy Research

The paradox of formalization identified here – improved conditions at the cost of reduced income and autonomy – resonates with findings from other informal sectors, including street vending, domestic work, and artisanal mining (Coletto & Bisschop, 2017; Banks et al., 2019). This suggests that formalization processes commonly involve fundamental trade-offs that must be acknowledged in policy design.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

This study's focus on Federal District cooperatives may limit the generalizability of findings to other contexts with different political, economic, or social conditions. The specific characteristics of the Estrutural landfill--its size, longevity, and the magnitude of its closure--create a unique context that may not reflect the experiences of waste pickers in smaller or different types of waste management operations.

Future research should explore longer-term outcomes of the transition, including whether economic conditions in cooperatives improve over time and how participants' evaluations of the transition evolve. Comparative studies examining different cooperative models and support structures could provide insights into more effective approaches to waste picker integration. Additionally, research examining the perspectives of family members, community leaders, and

other stakeholders could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the transition's broader impacts.

6 Conclusion

This study reveals the profound complexity of waste pickers' transition from informal landfill work to formal cooperative structures, challenging simplistic narratives about the benefits of formalization while highlighting both significant achievements and persistent challenges. The voices of 20 waste pickers who lived through this transformation provide crucial insights into the human dimensions of policy implementation and the multifaceted impacts of closing Latin America's largest open dump.

The findings demonstrate that formalization involves complex trade-offs rather than unambiguous improvements. While participants universally valued the improved working conditions, dignity, and social recognition associated with cooperative membership, they simultaneously confronted reduced income, constrained autonomy, and ongoing operational challenges. This paradox reflects broader tensions in informal economy formalization and highlights the need for more nuanced policy approaches that address the full range of worker experiences and values.

The study's emphasis on participant voices reveals dimensions of the transition that are often overlooked in policy discussions, including the importance of dignity and recognition, the value of work autonomy, and the intergenerational impacts of improved working conditions. The reduction in social discrimination, improved family relationships, and enhanced opportunities for children's education demonstrate how formalization benefits extend beyond individual workers to encompass broader family and community well-being.

However, the persistent challenges identified--limited government support, operational difficulties, and economic constraints--point to fundamental structural issues that undermine the sustainability of current approaches to waste picker integration. The inadequacy of support

systems, infrastructure investment, and economic mechanisms for ensuring cooperative viability suggests that current policy frameworks require substantial strengthening to achieve their stated goals of social inclusion and environmental sustainability.

The implications for public policy are clear: successful waste picker integration requires comprehensive, sustained support that addresses not only initial cooperative formation but also long-term economic viability, technical capacity, and social recognition. This includes adequate funding for infrastructure and equipment, market development support, health and safety programs, and efforts to combat ongoing discrimination. Moreover, policy approaches should explore innovative models that preserve valued aspects of informal work--such as autonomy and flexibility--within formal structures.

The transition from the Estrutural landfill to cooperatives represents both an ending and a beginning. The closure of Latin America's largest open dump eliminated extreme health and safety risks while providing opportunities for greater dignity and social inclusion. However, the full realization of waste pickers' potential as environmental agents and formal workers requires continued commitment to addressing the economic, social, and structural challenges that persist in their transition to cooperative participation.

As Brazil and other Latin American countries continue to develop their waste management systems and implement policies aimed at waste picker inclusion, the experiences documented in this study provide crucial guidance for creating more effective, equitable, and sustainable approaches. The wisdom embedded in waste pickers' lived experiences--their understanding of both the costs and benefits of formalization--offers invaluable insights for building systems that truly serve both environmental goals and social justice objectives.

The story of waste pickers' transition from the Estrutural landfill ultimately reflects broader questions about development, inclusion, and the future of work in an increasingly formal economy. By centering their voices and experiences, this study contributes to more nuanced

understandings of these processes while advocating for approaches that honor both the knowledge and the rights of marginalized workers. The path forward requires not just policy change but a fundamental shift in how society values and supports the essential work of waste recovery and environmental protection.

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Appendix A – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The following guide was used to conduct the 20 semi-structured interviews. Questions were adapted during the course of each interview to follow participants' narratives and explore emergent themes.

Section 1: Background and Entry into Waste Picking

1. Could you tell me about yourself and your family?
2. How did you start working with waste picking? What circumstances led you to this activity?
3. How old were you when you began? Did other family members also work with waste?

Section 2: Experiences at the Estrutural Landfill

4. Can you describe a typical day of work at the Estrutural landfill?
5. What were the working conditions like? What aspects did you find most difficult?
6. How much did you earn on average? How did you manage your income?
7. Did you experience any health problems or accidents related to landfill work?
8. How did you feel about your work at the landfill? How did other people treat you?
9. What was the relationship like among the waste pickers at the landfill?

Section 3: The Closure and Transition

10. How did you learn about the landfill closure? What was your initial reaction?
11. How did the transition to cooperative work happen for you? What support did you receive?
12. What were the biggest challenges during the transition period?

Section 4: Cooperative Experience

13. Can you describe your current work at the cooperative?

14. What are the main differences between working at the landfill and working at the cooperative?
15. What do you see as the advantages of cooperative work? And the disadvantages?
16. How is the cooperative organized? How are decisions made?
17. What challenges does the cooperative face today?

Section 5: Social and Family Impacts

18. How has the change from the landfill to the cooperative affected your family life?
19. Have you noticed changes in how people treat you since you joined the cooperative?
20. How has this transition affected your children's lives and education?

Section 6: Future Perspectives

21. What are your hopes for the future – for yourself and for the cooperative?
22. What would you recommend to the government to improve the situation of waste pickers?
23. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

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