

Understanding the Waste Picker Living Income Gap

TO STRENGTHEN CIRCULAR VALUE CHAINS

SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM 13 CASE STUDIES CONDUCTED
DURING PHASE 3 OF THE LIVING INCOME PROJECT

JANUARY 22-23, 2026





The FCI brings businesses together to create an ecosystem to implement the Fair Circularity Principles within global, regional and national policy, and within waste and recycling value chains to ensure the human rights of waste pickers are respected and their critical role in circular value chains is recognized.

THE FAIR CIRCULARITY PRINCIPLES

apply the expectations and responsibilities outlined in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to the informal waste sector.



Speakers

- ASTHA SINGH, SYSTEMIQ
- NGUYEN THI HOAI LINH, ENDA, VIETNAM
- ROGER KOEPLI, GREEN FRANQUIAS, BRAZIL
- LAURA REYES, CEMPRE, COLOMBIA

CHAIR: CHARLENE COLLISON, BSR, FAIR CIRCULARITY SECRETARIAT





Agenda

01

INTRODUCTION

Welcome, background, and context by the
FCI Secretariat

02

SUMMARY OF CASE STUDY RESULTS

Presentation by Systemiq

03

CASE STUDY PRESENTATIONS

- Vietnam
- Colombia
- Brazil

04

Q&A





Introduction

01

Challenges experienced by waste pickers and
the aims of the living income project





Despite their indispensable role in the global recycling system, informal workers are often underappreciated and underpaid.

THE FCI CARRIED OUT THE LIVING INCOME PROJECTS TO

- Better understand the incomes of waste pickers in a range of locations, and factors influencing them;
- Create a practical methodology to promote the provision of a living income within selected supply chains.

KEY STATS

19 – 24 MILLION

INFORMAL WORKERS, MAKING UP ~0.5 – 1% OF THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE

15 – 20%

INFORMAL WORKERS JOINTLY COLLECT AND PROCESS 15-20% OF METROPOLITAN WASTE ON A GLOBAL SCALE

60 %

INFORMAL WORKERS ACCOUNT FOR 60% OF GLOBAL PLASTIC COLLECTED FOR RECYCLING



- 1 Inadequate Standard of Living
- 2 Lack of Respect for Freedom of Association/ Collective Bargaining
- 3 Lack of Recognition and Social Stigma
- 4 Marginalization/ Discrimination/ Lack of Inclusion
- 5 Exclusion from Social and Financial Services
- 6 Child Labor and Child Accompaniment
- 7 Impacts on Workplace Health and Safety
- 8 Impacts on Other Conditions of Decent Work

Common human rights impacts experienced by waste pickers





Business case for respecting human rights of waste pickers

- Waste pickers are part of the value chain of companies that produce or utilize plastic waste or use recycled content.
- Given this, waste pickers are within the scope of those companies' responsibility to respect human rights under the UNGPs, which extends throughout their value chain.
- As companies scale use of recycled content, these human rights and livelihoods issues have become upstream responsibilities.
- As attention on plastic pollution continues to increase, so does scrutiny from stakeholders.
- Many brands have human rights policies that commit them to respecting and advancing the human rights of all people throughout their value chain.
- The issues facing waste pickers in recycling value chains present a significant brand and corporate reputational risk for many companies.



BUILD INCLUSIVE AND RESILIENT RECYCLED PLASTIC SUPPLY CHAINS



INCREASE COLLECTION RATES AND SUPPLY OF RESPONSIBLY SOURCED PLASTIC



REDUCE LEGAL RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH EMERGING REGULATIONS



UPHOLD RESPONSIBILITY TO RESPECT HUMAN RIGHTS

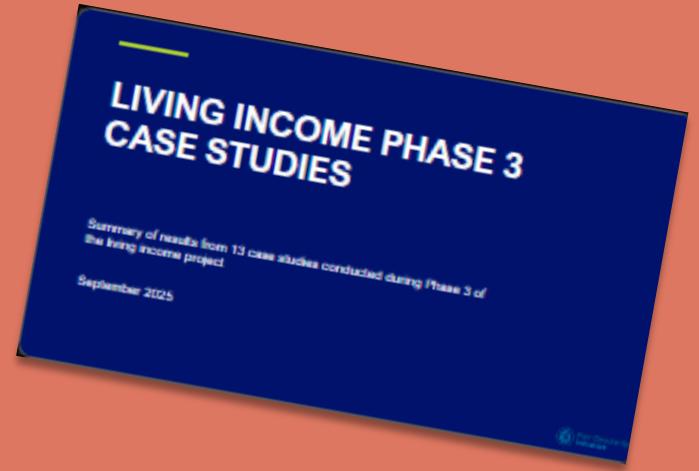
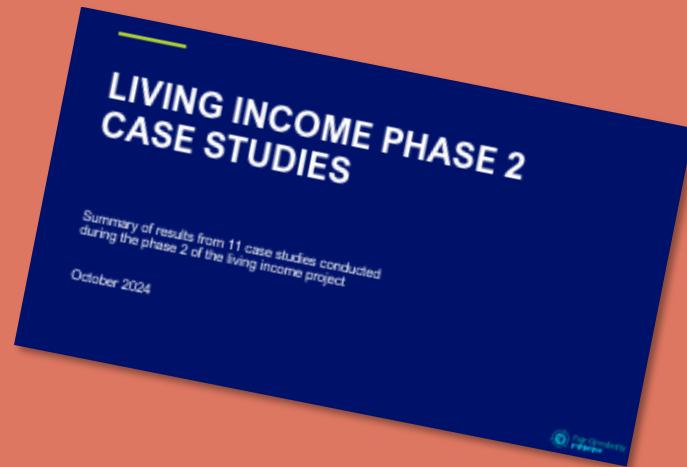


ENHANCE BRAND REPUTATION AND SOCIAL LICENSE TO OPERATE



Living Income Studies

Evolution from phase I to Phase III



- Developed living income assessment methodology based on the Anker methodology
- Conducted living income assessments in **11 locations across 7 countries** – Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, India, Kenya, Nigeria and Philippines
- Added analysis on earnings and material mix by waste pickers to the methodology
- Assessment expanded to **13 locations in 8 countries** – Brazil, Colombia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Vietnam
- Conducted case studies in **3 locations** – Brazil, Ghana and India



With thanks to all our local partners

Alianza Giro

Araucania Hub

ASKI Philippines

Association of Scraps and Waste Pickers of Lagos

CECR

ENDA

CEMPRE and ASI

Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group

Delhi Roundtable on Solid Waste Management

Earthworm Foundation and Jarak Indonesia

Flip Flopi Project

Hasiru Dala

Nigeria Climate Innovation Centre

ORIS/INSEA (ANCAT)

Ouroboros Waste Management

Pacific Recycling Foundation

You Green / Green Franquias

Consultants: *Ricardo Abussafy, Dorcas Ansah, Karim Saagbul, Dr. Owusu Boampong*

Systemiq

ADVISORY GROUP

Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers, Nestlé, Tearfund, The Circulate Initiative, The University of Leeds, Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)





Living Income Phase 3 Case Studies

02

Summary of results from 13 case studies conducted during
Phase 3 of the living income project

October 2025

Astha Singh, Systemiq



We have conducted 13 case studies thanks to the work of our local partners

13 case studies were conducted by local organizations

Country	Local Organization	Assessments	Locations
 Brazil	You Green / Green Franquias	2	Sao Paulo, Curitiba
 Colombia	CEMPRE and ASI	2	Bogota, Barranquilla
 Fiji	Pacific Recycling Foundation	1	Fiji
 India	Delhi Roundtable on Solid Waste Management	1	New Delhi
 Indonesia	Earthworm Foundation and Jarak Indonesia	1	Bekasi
 Nigeria	Association of Scraps and Waste Pickers of Lagos	1	Lagos
 Pakistan	Ouroboros Waste Management	3	Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar
 Vietnam	CECR and ENDA	2	Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City



Local partners have conducted surveys across 13 locations



Our methodology builds on three core pillars

Establish the baseline...

A Current waste picker earnings

Define the **current earnings** by waste pickers or the salaries received by waste workers

Determine the need...

B Living income

Calculate the locally applicable living income required to guarantee a **decent standard of living** for workers in informal and cooperatives settings.

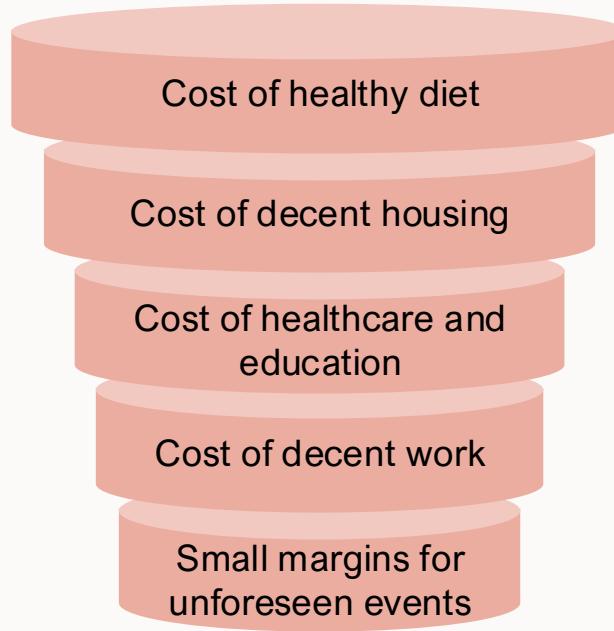
Compare against benchmarks...

C Legal minimum wage & comparable incomes

Compare against incomes in **other comparable jobs** or against **government minimum wages**.



The **living income** is the sum of all the household costs to get a decent standard of living




**Net
Living Wage**




**Net
Living Income**




**Number of full-time
workers per family**

(Cost of basic but decent life for
reference size family)



We surveyed three types of waste pickers

1

INDEPENDENT WASTE PICKERS

Waste pickers that are not part of any organization, e.g., in streets, collecting from households for a fee, etc.

2

INFORMALLY ORGANIZED WASTE PICKERS

Waste pickers that work together informally without contracts, e.g., in an informal cooperative, junkshop, etc.

3

FORMALLY ORGANIZED WASTE PICKERS

Waste pickers that are contracted with / part of registered cooperatives, including waste banks.

Summary of results



Waste pickers have a median earning of ~35% of the living income

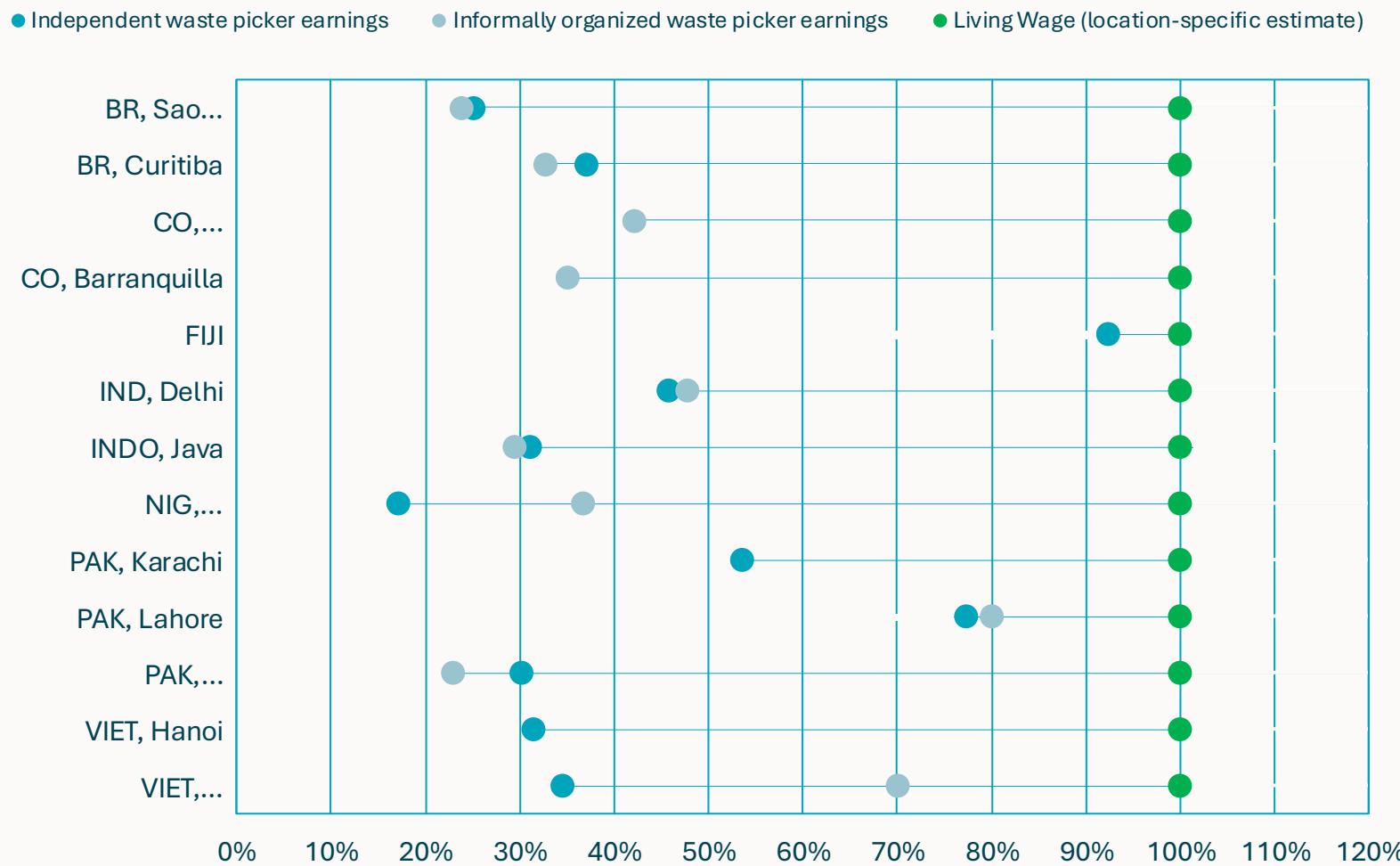
Results of the case studies by location



Key Insights

Waste pickers have a median earning of ~35% of the living income

Results of the case studies by location

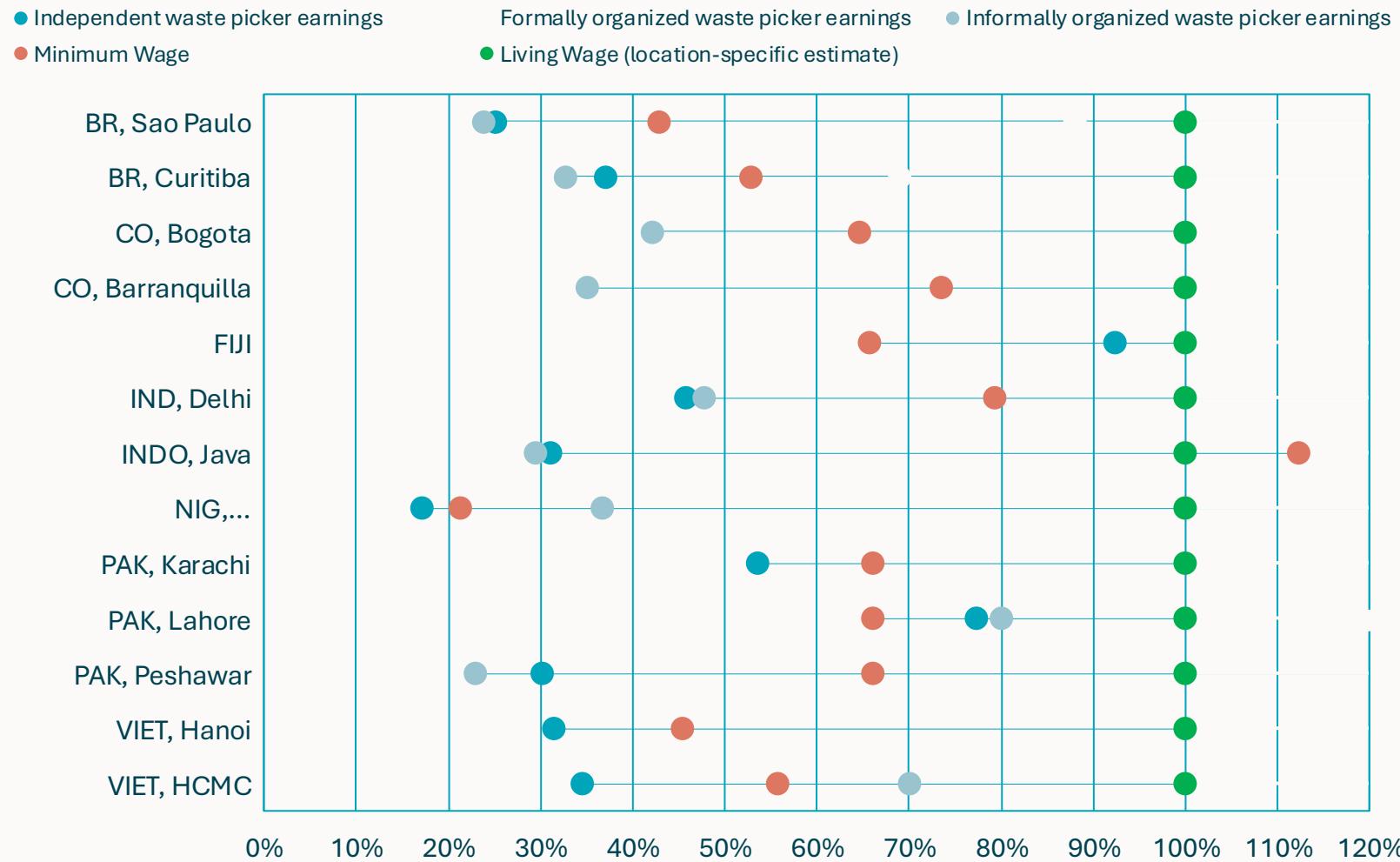


Key Insights

- Waste pickers (all typologies) earn **lower than the estimated living income in most locations**.
- Independent and informally organized waste pickers have a median earning of **~35% of the estimated living income**.

Waste pickers have a median earning of ~35% of the living income

Results of the case studies by location

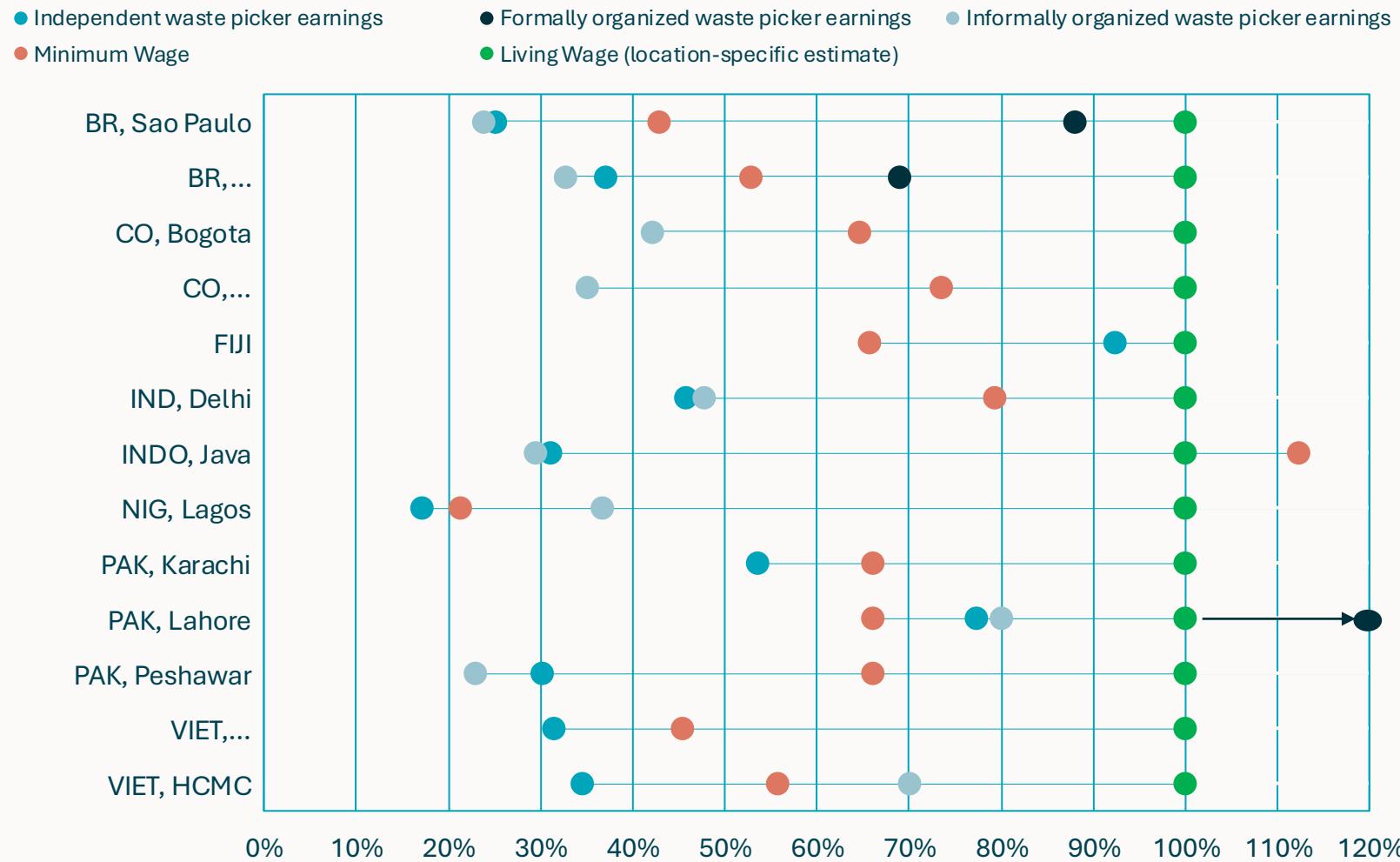


Key Insights

- Waste pickers (all typologies) earn **lower than the estimated living income in most locations**.
- Independent and informally organized waste pickers have a median earning of **~35% of the estimated living income**.
- In most cases, independent and informally organized waste pickers **earn lower than the minimum wage**.

Waste pickers have a median earning of ~35% of the living income

Results of the case studies by location



Key Insights

- Waste pickers (all typologies) earn **lower than the estimated living income in most locations**.
- Independent and informally organized waste pickers have a median earning of **~35% of the estimated living income**.
- In most cases, independent and informally organized waste pickers **earn lower than the minimum wage**.
- Typically, **as the level of organization increases, waste picker earnings increase**. Formally organized workers earn more than informally organized and independent workers in most cases, e.g., in Sao Paulo formally organized cooperative workers earned up to **3.5x** independents waste pickers.

Waste pickers face wide-ranging challenges

Key challenges



Volatile prices and weak bargaining power

- Volatile scrap prices
- Limited bargaining power
- Several intermediaries



Low volumes / collection efficiency

- Restricted access to waste
- High competition for recyclables
- Limited capacity to collect & store



Limited organization and cooperative capabilities

- Low access to capital
- Limited access tools & infrastructure
- Need for capability building



Health and safety risks

- Unsafe / hazardous working conditions
- Lack of protective gear
- Lack of protection against abuse



Lack of institutional support

- Limited inclusion in the law
- Lacking awareness of rights
- Limited social programs, marginalization



Limited education and capacity building

- Lacking education
- Low financial literacy

¹ Note, many waste pickers are migrants and do not have the required identification to get access to government services.

Government and private sector should ACT to HELP REDUCING THE income gaps

Government / policy



- Strengthen **EPR frameworks to be inclusive** of informal waste pickers
- Support **recognition of waste picking** as legitimate occupation and support better identification
- Support **formation of cooperatives** and the cascading of **service fees** (e.g. “*Tarifa de aprovechamiento*” in Colombia)¹.
- Set **social programs** for waste pickers on healthcare, education, etc.
- Raise **public awareness to reduce marginalization**

Private sector



- Recognize **linkages to informal waste sectors** in own value chains
- Apply **UN Guiding Principles on Business & Human Rights** (UNGPs) and **Fair Circularity Initiative Principles**
- Support **international & local advocacy** for waste picker rights in global treaties and local policies
- Build **capabilities of cooperatives**, supporting best practice adoption
- Engage in **direct remediation projects** (e.g., supply essential protective gear, health and family support, etc.)

¹ The “*Tarifa de aprovechamiento*” service fee compensates waste pickers for their collection services in Colombia, on a per kilo basis, as an earning in addition to the sales revenue the waste picker will receive from the scrap materials



Case Study Results

03

Vietnam: Nguyen Thi Hoai Linh, ENDA

Colombia: Laura Reyes, CEMPRE

Brazil: Roger Koepll, Green Franquias





CASE STUDY

Vietnam



Region: Ho Chi Minh City

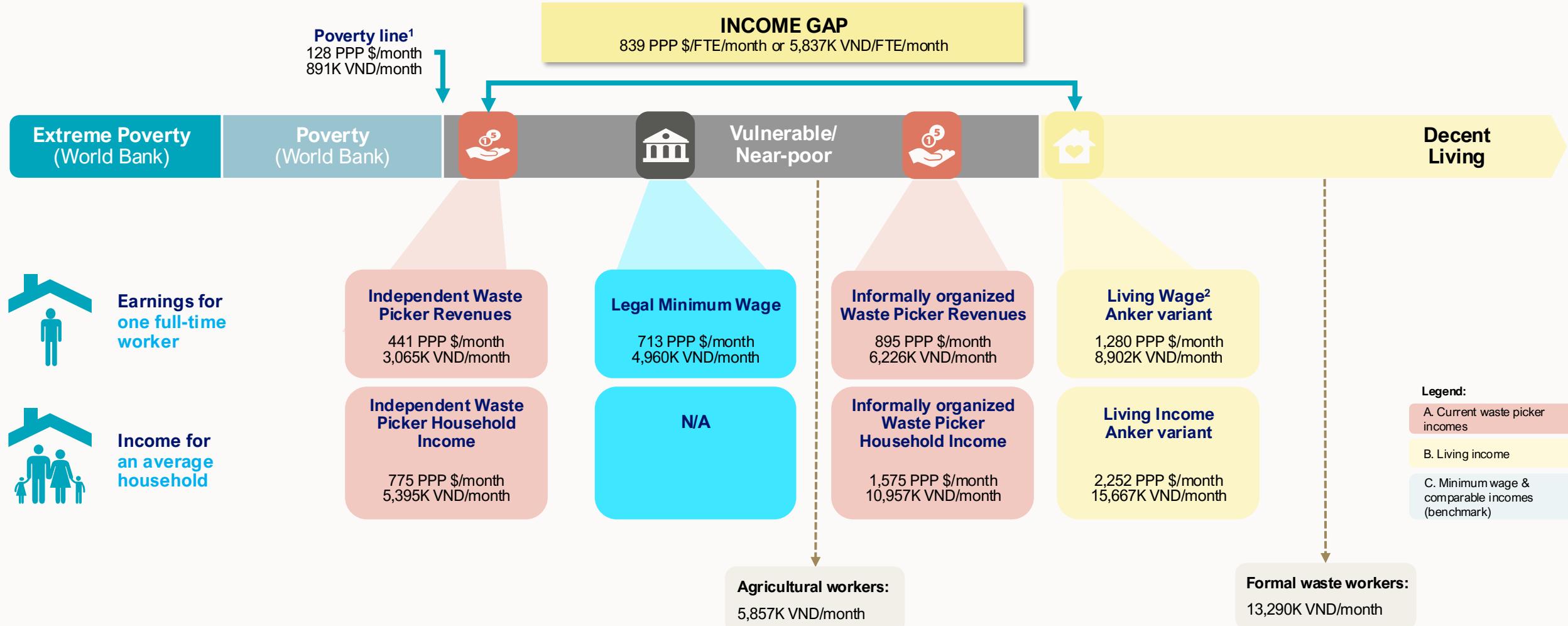
Currency: Vietnamese Dong (VND)

Case Study conducted by: ENDA

Year: 2025



Income Gap: HCMC has an income gap of 5.8M VND per month



All \$ are in PPP 2024

(1) World bank poverty line for lower middle income (4.20 \$/cap/day - PPP 2021)

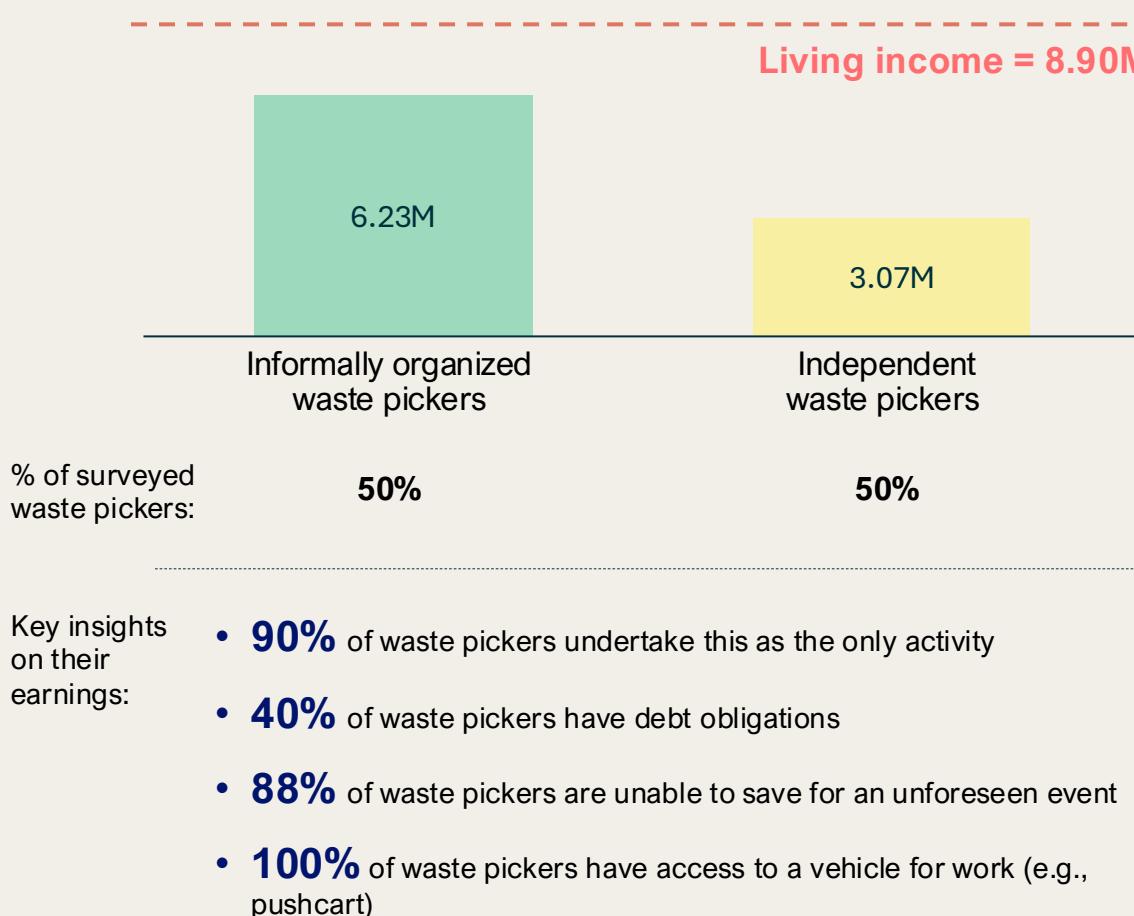
(2) The concept of wage living is defined as remuneration received for a standard work week by a worker in a particular place sufficient to afford a decent standard of living for the worker and her or his family. Note that living incomes calculated in this study followed the Anker methodology but may not be considered Anker conformant given they have not been independently reviewed by the Anker Research Institute.

(3) Variant calculated by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (DIEESE) following a different methodology from Anker as it include leisure, transport, hygiene and clothing costs.

Current income: majority of independent waste pickers are migrants and need formalization to compete for EPR services



Average earning¹ per worker typology, VND/month



Main limitation to increase revenues

- Price of recyclables varies significantly, making the income of waste pickers unpredictable.
- Independent waste pickers require formalization and capacity building, e.g., by forming cooperatives, to compete with established waste management companies for EPR services/fees.
- Majority of independent waste pickers have limited knowledge/skills, financial capacity, and limited access to technologies.
- Majority of independent waste pickers are migrants and therefore, cannot access social welfare programs. In comparison formal waste workers have access to accident and healthcare insurance.
- Advocacy with city government is routinely needed to ensure household collection fee is fair for informally organized waste pickers.



CASE STUDY



Brazil

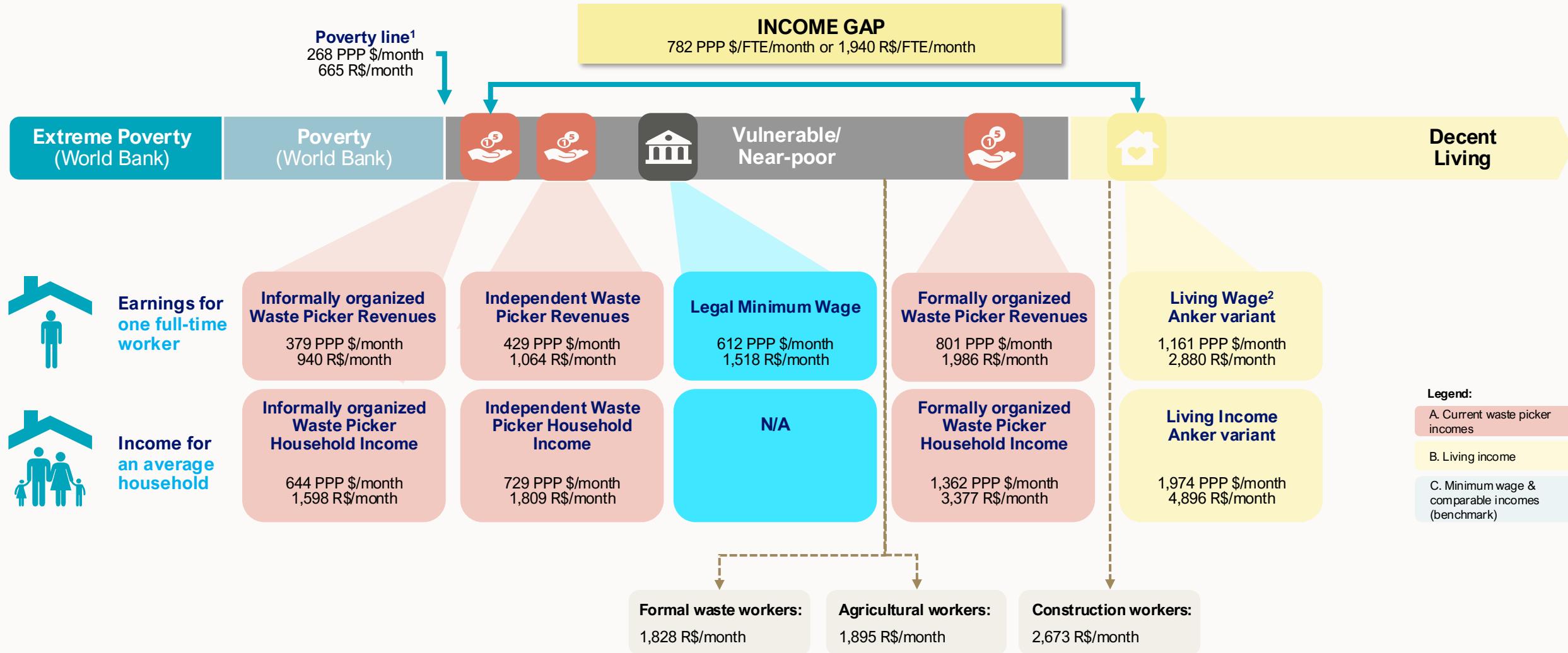
Region: Curitiba, Parana

Currency: Brazilian Real (R\$)

Case Study conducted by: You Green

Year: 2025

Income Gap: Curitiba has an income gap of 1,940 R\$ per month



All \$ are in PPP 2024

(1) World bank poverty line for lower middle income (4.20 \$/cap/day - PPP 2021)

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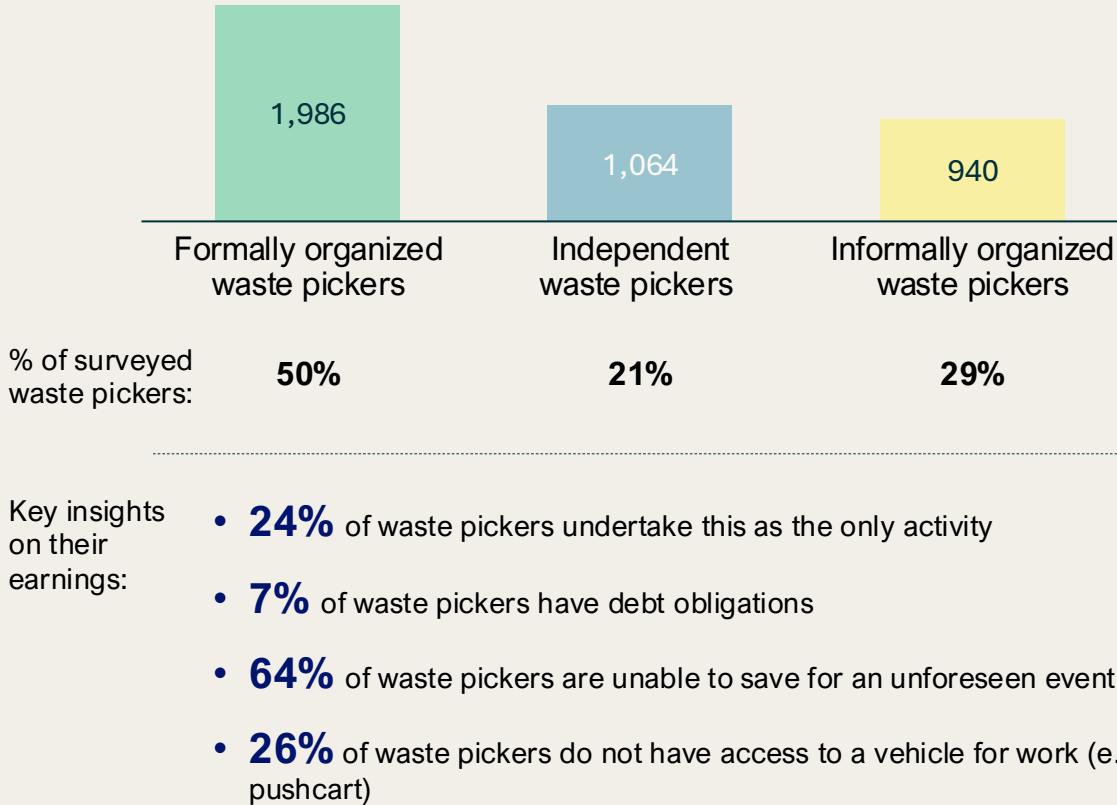
(3) Variant calculated by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (DIEESE) following a different methodology from Anker as it include leisure, transport, hygiene and clothing costs.

Current income: formally organized waste pickers earn more than independent and informally organized



Average earning¹ per worker typology, R\$/month

Living income = 2,880



Main limitation to increase revenues

- Waste picker conditions in cooperatives are much worse in Curitiba. Note, cooperatives in São Paulo get compensation for rent, water and electricity. This is not the case in Curitiba.
- Lower volume of materials, e.g., lack of big generators in Curitiba, which supply volumes to cooperatives directly
- Sale price of materials can vary significantly, for instance owing to competition from other collectors.
- Worker productivity can be low, owing to – lack of infrastructure at worksite, physical conditions of waste picking, etc. Many junkyards are poorly managed.
- Transportation of materials is a significant challenge



CASE STUDY



Colombia

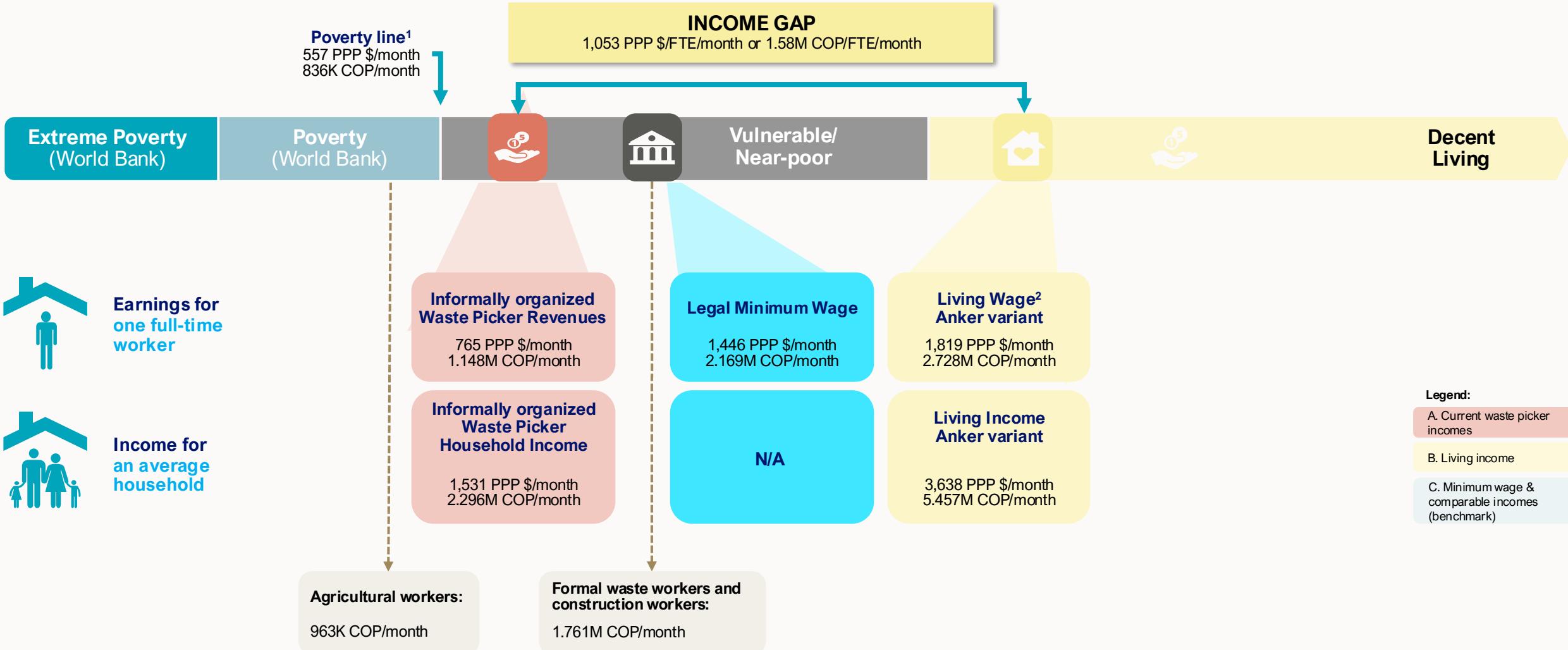
Region: Bogotá

Currency: Colombian Pesos (COP)

Case Study conducted by: CEMPRE

Year: 2025

Income Gap: Bogota has an income gap of 3.5M COP per month



All \$ are in PPP 2024

(1) World bank poverty line for lower middle income (4.20 \$/cap/day - PPP 2021)

(2) The concept of wage living is defined as remuneration received for a standard work week by a worker in a particular place sufficient to afford a decent standard of living for the worker and her or his family. Note that living incomes calculated in this study followed the Anker methodology but may not be considered Anker conformant given they have not been independently reviewed by the Anker Research Institute.

(3) Variant calculated by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (DIEESE) following a different methodology from Anker as it include leisure, transport, hygiene and clothing costs.

Current income: waste pickers are significantly affected by price volatility of material prices



Average earning¹ per worker typology, COP/month

Living income = 2.73M

1.15M

Informally organized
waste pickers

Key insights
on their
earnings:

- **89%** of waste pickers undertake this as the only activity
- **3%** of waste pickers have debt obligations
- **25%** of waste pickers are unable to save for an unforeseen event
- **3%** of waste pickers do not have access to a vehicle for work (e.g., pushcart)

Main limitation to increase revenues

- Sharp price volatility which makes incomes unpredictable – in the months prior to the study the PET prices dropped by 50%
- Competition between waste pickers and waste coops to access materials reduces the volumes available for collection and reselling
- Poor separation of materials at sources forces waste pickers to spend more time extracting usable materials from mixed waste
- Lack of a vehicles to transport waste, limiting material volumes and earnings



Q&A

04

Please write your questions in the chat and the moderators will select questions for each presenter



Thank You

JANUARY 2026

