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View from the Mountain

A South African Waste Picker's Uphill Battle during COVID-19

by Jenny Grice

Over more than 20 years, Justina Kgoele and almost 300 fellow waste pickers who work on one of the landfill mountains in Johannesburg have found ways to manage their harsh jobs to support their families. COVID-19 disrupted everything, forcing them to make new plans to survive.





Waste picker Justina Kgoele (above) who makes her living on Johannesburg's Marie Louise landfill (opposite).

Cover: Covered from head to toe in her work clothes, gumboots on her feet, Justina is surrounded by waste. To an uneducated eye, it's chaos. But as she points things out, the semi-circle of Justina's workspace becomes clear.

Photos: Jenny Grice



The mountain of waste that is Marie Louise landfill rises up above the surrounding landscape. Dust blurs the 360 degree view.

Look east and you'll see the skyscrapers of Johannesburg against the horizon, south and west the sprawling township of Soweto, and north the more affluent suburbs. Much of the waste that makes this mountain comes from those northern suburbs. Old gold mine dumps with their amber tops lie to the east and west of the waste mountain.

Gold once transformed Johannesburg from a dusty, dry town into this bustling city with its population of close to six million. Waste pickers like Justina Kgoele now mine this landfill for a different kind of resource.

It's the end of October 2020 and the lowest level of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions still apply—wear masks, wash hands, observe social distancing—but the harshness of the initial lockdown restrictions have been eased.

It's 32 degrees Celsius on top of the waste mountain. There are no trees that give shade. A little whirlwind tosses up bits of plastic and paper into the air like birds taking flight after a scare. The smell of methane gas pervades the air. Underfoot the frills of yellows, blues and whites of supermarket bags are overlaid with soil and compacted together with nails, plastic bottle tops, bits of concrete and other unidentifiable rubbish. There's a steady rumble of garbage trucks, 10-ton trucks filled with builders' rubble, as well as small trucks and cars pulling trailers. Swirls of dust shroud the goings-on. The mountain shudders from the activity.

The waste mountain is the size of several rugby fields.

Waste picker Justina Kgoele mines the Marie Louise landfill for valuable recyclables. She has made her living this way for more than 25 years.

The trucks with builders' rubble stop on the top and dump their loads. The other vehicles carry on to the far side of the mountain, following the track that drops down to where a small waste foothill is taking shape. The landfill waste pickers swarm to the arriving trucks. At the foot of the landfill, rudimentary spaza shops cook and sell food to those working on the landfill, while small-time recyclers hustle with landfill waste pickers to buy the material they've mined from the garbage.

Justina stands on top of the mountain, covered from head to toe in her work clothes, gumboots on her feet. Waste surrounds her. Giant polypropylene bags filled with materials look down on her. To an uneducated eye, it's chaos. But as she points things out, the semi-circle of Justina's workspace becomes clear. The giant bags filled with sorted recycling are her walls. In front of these walls, there's a mass of other recycling material that she's selected from the mound of garbage at the bottom of the mountain, dragged up it, but hasn't yet allocated to the correct bag.

In the middle of her workspace is a section covered with a tarpaulin. Lifting up the tarpaulin exposes a large trunk. Inside the trunk are her clean clothes and shoes that transform her at the end of the day as well as sanitizer, a mirror, her cell phone, and other important items. It's her locker that doesn't lock but it's safe here because the people around her are colleagues she can trust. All are members of the **African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO)**,¹ formed in 2018 to bring together street and landfill waste pickers. Down the mountain where there are unknown people coming in to the landfill every day, it's a different story. "Your cell phone is not safe there," she says.

Recycling terms roll off her tongue as she points to the different bags—PET, HD, white paper—not surprising for someone who's worked on this landfill since 1994. Two massive bags, filled with clear plastic that look exactly the same to the untrained eye, sit adjacent to each other. "You see this plastic is different from that one. You have to separate them in different bags to get a better price."

Glancing around at the mountaintop, workspaces of others are now clear. None have as many bags nor bags as big as Justina's. "I sell my stuff monthly, so I get better money so that I can do the things that I want to do and [pay for] the things like savings, burial society and my life policy."

¹ Many waste pickers in South Africa are from neighbouring states. ARO waste pickers specifically chose the word 'African' in their name to recognize their non-sectarian and anti-xenophobic stance.

Before lockdown began at the end of March, Justina was making between R4,000 and R5,000² a month, sometimes more. It's a gruelling, six-days-a-week, twelve-hours-a-day job. She is the main breadwinner in her household of seven—a husband, two adult children, one child of 12 and two grandchildren under 13. Her husband contributes to the household when he gets piece jobs on the mines, and her daughter when she works at a shop near where they live.

Government imposes strict COVID-19 lockdown

All that changed when COVID-19 spread across the world, hitting South Africa at the beginning of March 2020. The South African government responded swiftly by imposing a very restrictive lockdown on March 26. Most businesses were required to halt their operations. People who weren't essential service workers, including waste pickers, had to stay at home and were only allowed out of their homes to buy food or for emergencies.

Even before lockdown began, Justina and her co-workers had seen their incomes drop. Plastics are derived from oil. Companies buying plastics from waste pickers or buy-back centres will always set their prices in tandem with the oil price. There's no sense in them buying used plastic bottles if the price of making virgin plastic from oil is cheaper. In March the oil price plummeted, averaging just above USD30 a barrel. In December 2019, it had been double the price.

Demand for recyclables also affects the prices that recyclers are prepared to pay waste pickers. If the economy begins to falter, or if there is no demand from users of particular types of recyclables, waste pickers will see the result in lower prices.

In March, Justina held back from selling everything that she had in the hopes that prices would go up again when they were allowed back to work. "We asked [the security] to look after our stuff. We told them, 'we don't have money, when we come back we'll pay you'. You see if you had something and then you don't, you don't believe that this thing is happening. We were thinking 'maybe tomorrow [the president] will change his mind'. Always you think that maybe tomorrow we [will] go back to work."

² South African Rand averaged R16.6 to USD1 between January and November 2020.

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Lockdown ended her husband's contract and her daughter's. Schools were closed, stopping the government's feeding programme that targets disadvantaged children—including Justina's three small children, who had been receiving one meal a day at school. The household was now faced with zero income in April apart from government's child support grants of R445 for each of just two of the young children. Having money for food, water and electricity was essential, but she also needed to pay her insurance policies at the bank (about R500 or so) to ensure they didn't lapse.

Effect on other informal workers

It wasn't only Justina and her fellow waste pickers who were harshly affected by the lockdown. The waste pickers on the landfill have created jobs for others on the mountain. There's the young men who they pay R40 a bag to jump into the big bags of polypropylene plastic bottles or other material to compact it. The more material that can be squeezed in, the heavier the bag and the more money a waste picker will earn.

Each waste picker also pays R40 per week to security to guard their bags.

Down the mountain, there are 16 small informal lean-to spaza shops that cook and sell food³ and drink to keep the waste pickers and the other workers fortified.

All of this informal work dried up or was severely curtailed by the lockdown.

Life at home under lockdown

Locked down at home with six others, Justina sat down with her family and discussed the situation with them: "I'm staying at home, I'm not working. The money that I've saved we eat... if it's finished, it's finished."

When asked about how they all coped under one roof, confined to their RDP⁴ house with little money and barely enough food, she laughs it off. "Just little things like maybe you're hungry, there's no bread and someone's shouting, 'who finished my...'" There were bigger fights over who gets to choose the television programme. "Sometimes he [her youngest son] cries if you change the tv when he's watching those cartoons!"

³ A favourite meal is "skop", the colloquial name for a boiled sheep's head, which is sold widely across South Africa's informal food outlets.

⁴ The government has a programme for providing subsidized houses to South African citizens who are first time homeowners and whose household income is less than R3,500 per month.



*None of the other waste pickers have as many bags nor bags as big as Justina's.
Photo: Jenny Grice*

For Justina, her six-day work week on the landfill had already established a situation where her adult children would take on some of the household chores. This continued and cushioned her during lockdown. She wasn't so successful with her husband. She chuckles, "You know the men from the rural areas, 'I'm a man, I'm not doing this and that, this one is for a woman.'" But not having her husband clean and cook was a minor irritant. With reports of gender-based violence soaring during lockdown, Justina is just happy that "God blessed me; he gave me a quiet, peaceful man."

There's no doubt though that what helped Justina cope best was her resourcefulness. "If today there is no bread, it's the normal thing. Within 10 minutes I will make a plan so that my children can eat. To be a reclaimer, we have so many plans in our minds."

When her savings were almost depleted in April, and their food was running out, she called ARO. In response to reports of extreme hardship from their members, the organization had started a [crowd-funding campaign](#). It used the money to provide much-needed relief to waste pickers—including immigrants—as quickly as possible once lockdown eased.⁵

Justina liaised with ARO to bring a truck with food parcels to Marie Louise landfill. Messages were sent to other waste pickers to come on a specific date to the gate of the landfill

⁵ Although South Africa's government had set up a huge food aid programme, it required beneficiaries to have a South African identity document, which excluded a very large number of ARO's members. ARO's initiative also spurred big companies that buy from waste pickers like Nampak, as well as buy-back centres like Mpact, to contribute.



The African Reclaimers Organisation used the money from its crowd-funding campaign to provide relief to waste pickers. Photo: ARO

(everything was still officially locked down). However, word got out and residents of the nearby township, Braamfischerville, which looks onto the landfill, flocked to Marie Louise. Justina recalls that in their desperation, people were climbing over the truck, grabbing the food parcels by force. Soldiers and metro police had to be called in to help ARO maintain social distance and ensure that the food parcels were handed out to the waste pickers alone.

Justina received a food parcel with essentials like maize meal, cooking oil, tinned food, and soya beans, as well as masks and sanitizer.

Setback

Then in the middle of April, a fellow waste picker came to tell Justina that her place at the landfill was 'upside down'. She went to check. "Everything [was] gone. My place was empty." Others who did not normally work on the landfill had come and stolen what she'd put aside to sell when she was allowed back at work.

They were able to do this because some small buy-back centres in the black townships remained open in defiance of lockdown regulations. People risked being arrested by police and took the recyclables there to sell "so that they can eat," Justina says. "Saying that we all stayed at home during the lockdown is a big lie. Most of them were here, working, working."

She estimates she lost recycling material to a value of between R4,000 and R5,000. "I was staying at home, staying with children. I don't have money. People are stealing your stuff on the other side, it was horrible."

Results of surveys carried out by researchers in April, May and June 2020 revealed the extent of the suffering of a vast majority of the population caused by the very restrictive lockdown and the mass shedding of jobs when lockdown began. "Two out of every five adults interviewed between May and June reported that their household had lost its main source of income since the lockdown started..." The Conversation [reported in a July article](#) (Wills et al. 2020). "Of the adults we interviewed, 47% reported that their home ran out of money to buy food in April. Between May and June, 21% reported that someone in their household went hungry in the last seven days. And 15% reported that a child went hungry in the same period."

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Justina liaised with ARO to bring a truck with food parcels to Marie Louise landfill. The parcels contained essentials like maize meal, as well as masks and sanitizer. Photo: ARO

Hardship from a young age

Asked if she can ever remember such a difficult time in her life, Justina's confident voice falters. In her final year of school she almost had to abandon school when her father died and her school fees couldn't be paid. Her mother had already died. The church where she was boarding came to the rescue. She and her siblings survived, but they were passed from relative to relative, facing very difficult times.

And yet "those people who treat me so bad, made me a strong woman. Now I can manage to face every step of any problem; I'm not afraid of a tough life because I start to lead that life at a young age. Even now when my firstborn sees me working every night, 'Mama please, we are grown up now, we are working, sit down, we will help you.' But I say 'hayi, no I'm not sick'."

That resilience helped her too when her husband lost his job on the mines in 1994 and they had to work out how to put food on the table for their three children, the youngest of whom was just a baby. That's when Justina started at the landfill; 26 years later at 54 years old, she's still at it, 12 hours a day, six days a week.

What keeps her going now is there are still three small children under 13 who she is responsible for. "My last born and two grandchildren. Their Mum is unwell, so I'm supposed to prepare the future of these [grandchildren]; I'm supposed to make a budget for them so that even if I can pass away they can manage to go to school." She doesn't want them to suffer what she experienced as a child.

Back to work in May

Meanwhile representatives of ARO and another waste picker organization, **South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA)**, sent a petition to the minister of environment and held discussions with her, relaying their members' extreme hardship and entreating her to allow waste pickers to go back to work as soon as possible.

As a result of this pressure, restrictions were eased at the beginning of May, allowing waste pickers to return to work, as long as they had a permit. ARO helped with this process, organizing permits for waste pickers and giving them the legal right to be back at work.

At Justina's landfill, ARO liaised with Pikitup, the Johannesburg municipality's waste collection company, so that all recognized landfill workers on the site could get permits. As a result, she never feared harassment by police and was never hassled by them—unlike her counterparts in KwaZulu-Natal and other parts of South Africa, who have reported harassment by officials.

Dealing with the chaos on the landfill required more effort. Historically the landfill waste pickers had a sensitive relationship with Pikitup. They had a longstanding agreement that 280 waste pickers, whose names were registered with Pikitup, would be allowed entry onto the landfill each day. Now there were many more, and the vast majority were not on Pikitup's list.

"First of all," says Justina, "as a committee we had a meeting with the supervisor and the security at the gate." Then they met with all the new people who had flocked to the landfill during the high-level lockdown. They explained to them the restrictive arrangement with Pikitup. They gave everyone who was not supposed to be working there until the end of the week to sell what they'd collected and then to leave the landfill and not return.

Delivering that message would not be an easy task for anyone. How did she manage it? "People say to me 'Justina, when you talk, people are listening, why?' You have to respect each other, no shouting, no disinformation," skills she

says she learned in workshops organized by WIEGO.⁶ "If we chased them away, and they've got nothing and they've left their job inside, they will come and steal from you again."

The plan worked. By the following Monday, the unrecognized waste pickers were gone.

Working under the shadow of COVID-19

COVID-19, however, was a reality that would not go away. "The place where we are working, it makes you to feel afraid with a disease like this, you don't know what caused this. I was very, very scared." ARO brought 5 litres of Jik (sodium hypochlorite household bleach) every week, "so we diluted it and gave everybody 2 litres to go back home with so it can help even those who are left at home." The waste pickers also had masks and gloves supplied by Pikitup.

They discussed amongst themselves how to make sure that there would be appropriate social distancing at work. They split the group of 280 workers into two. The first group would work Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and the second group Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. Historically within each group, there were two shifts. The first shift, composed of workers like Justina who had worked on the landfill for many years, worked at the bottom of the hill, getting first choice of the waste from the trucks as they arrived, while the second shift sorted at the top of the hill. At lunch time, the shifts swapped places.

While this kept them safe from COVID (as of October 2020, none of them have had it as far as they know), it didn't help them earn the money that they sorely needed. They were effectively working half the number of hours that they had been before lockdown.

There were a myriad other problems. Government had banned the sale of alcohol so demand for packaging and glass had plunged. The oil price in May had improved a little from April's all time low of under USD20 a barrel, but still hadn't reached USD30 a barrel so sale prices for plastics were still well below what they had been at the beginning

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⁶ From 2016-2020, WIEGO ran the **Waste Integration in South Africa (WISA) project** in partnership with SAWPA and groundWork, an environmental justice organization. The project was designed to build waste pickers' capacity to effectively negotiate with authorities and improve integration into formal recycling and waste management systems. Some workshop content focused on working together as waste pickers and overcoming differences and building or improving democratic worker organizations. See <https://www.wiego.org/waste-integration-south-africa-wisa>

Waste pickers at the Boitshepi landfill near Johannesburg sort through what the municipal and private trucks dump there, looking for valuable recyclables. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage



of 2020. Many businesses were still closed. The only material really in demand was white paper. But with many businesses closed and staff working online from home, this was in short supply.

Several years before, when prices had been similarly low, waste pickers on the landfill had banded together and withheld their recycling. “We chased [those that were buying from us] away. We told them ‘when you want to come back, come back with a reasonable price.’” This time the waste pickers realized that this course of action wasn’t possible. Instead they were forced to try and do individual deals with buyers: “We’d go to the corner and talk to [the buyers], ‘please give me R1 [per kg], there’s three of us. Don’t tell anyone, okay.’”

To add to the problems, some of the Pikitup garbage truck drivers caught the virus and Pikitup was not able to service the city as normal, particularly the more affluent suburbs. Illegal dumping mushroomed around the city. Another company was contracted to remove the illegal dumping, and this filled up the landfill. Because waste pickers on the streets had already picked the valuable stuff from it, there was nothing lucrative left for the landfill waste pickers. “People who were working here were suffering a lot,” Justina says.

By the end of May, Justina had earned just R1,842—about a 60 per cent drop on what she’d earned per month pre-lockdown. At the end of September 2020, her earnings had climbed to R3,221, but that was still about 40 per cent below her best month’s earnings pre-lockdown. Still, it’s “better than staying home and getting nothing.”

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Justina’s drop in income is similar to the experience of women waste pickers in Durban between April and July 2020. A study by NGO Asiye eTafuleni found waste pickers had suffered a 30 per cent drop in pre-lockdown gross income, with women experiencing almost a 50 per cent decrease in earnings.

Mitigating the hardship

Luckily Justina’s husband and daughter went back to work in May and another truck delivered food parcels to the landfill for waste pickers. This time they kept the delivery a secret and there were no additional hungry mouths that appeared.

Government also increased the child support grant by R300 per child in May and announced that the caregiver would receive an extra R500 from May until October. Justina was one of the beneficiaries, receiving an extra R1,100 (R600 for two children plus the caregiver increase) because of this initiative. Her unemployed son also applied for the new Social Relief of Distress Grant of R350 initiated because of COVID-19 and was one of 2.7 million eligible people who received it.

While Justina, her husband and daughter were back at work, her unemployed son was able to look after the young school-going children who were still at home for months while schools remained closed. It was August before most grades were back at school.

What is most needed now?

What waste pickers really need, she says—and it’s something that ARO has been fighting for—is space where they can safely store and sort their material. And then bale it and sell to the recyclers.

Already they have an offer from a company to help them with a baling machine and another company has offered to pay the rent should they get a space. If this were to happen, they could cut out the middleman, sell direct to the recycling companies and with pooled resources, the joint price that the waste pickers would receive would be higher than at present.

She and her co-workers are hoping that “maybe next year things will be back to normal.” But building up the savings that she depleted during the early months of the COVID crisis will take much longer. Until then, she’s back on her mountain.

“To you it’s difficult, but to me it’s a normal life. It’s what makes me happy. I’m back at work.”

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References and links

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Justina belongs to the African Reclaimers Organisation, which acted quickly to raise funds when its members reported extreme hardship under lockdown. The group continues to provide much-needed relief to waste pickers—including immigrants. Photo: Jane Barrett



Waste pickers on Johannesburg's landfill mountains find ways to manage their jobs in harsh conditions to put food on the family table. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images Reportage



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