

Amplifying voice, visibility and validity

Waste pickers in Jo'burg city

We see reclaimers heaving waste on the the streets but Jo'burg city has not acknowledged their contribution. **Vanessa Pillay** tells of a waste integration project to assist in organising reclaimers and of an historic protest march to change their conditions and raise their visibility.

Waste pickers, reclaimers or abagerezi are workers whose livelihood depends on going through discarded waste to retrieve recyclable material. Their contribution places South Africa among the highest in the world at a 57% rate of collection of recyclables, according to Packaging SA statistics.

Waste pickers deliver almost all their pickings into the recycling chain. Yet they remain the most vulnerable actors at the bottom of the recycling value chain within a highly profitable industry, estimated at R15-billion in revenue for South Africa.

In the city of Johannesburg (Jo'burg) where Pikitup provides waste management services the company noted that in one area the amount of waste not going to the landfill was double that of what Pikitup was collecting. This suggests that informal waste pickers are very effective retrievers of recyclables.

There is a need to recognise and compensate waste pickers for their contribution to saving the environment. But here lies a contradiction. Waste pickers who divert waste material away from landfills, impact negatively on other pickers whose livelihood depends on retrieving recyclables at the landfill.

The majority of these workers remain outside the recycling system as the working poor. Just a few are part of the 25 cooperatives that the city has contracted over the past 12 years to collect waste in particular areas, and a few have been included in Extended Public Works Programmes. In general the Johannesburg municipality has not made them part of their waste strategy.

We see waste pickers pulling makeshift trolleys on the streets and rummaging through bins. We also find them on municipal and private landfill sites in the city risking life and limb to make a living.

WASTE INTEGRATION PROJECT

Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising (Wiego) in consultation with the South African Waste Pickers Association (Sawpa) and the environmental justice organisation groundWork started the Waste Integration in South Africa (Wisa) project. They aim to strengthen the organisation of waste pickers in the Jo'burg, Tshwane and Sasolburg municipalities.

Through strengthened organisation on the ground waste pickers can take part in decision-making and policy discussions that affect their role in municipal waste management. During the three-year project (2016–2019) lessons learned

will be applied to other cities.

The Wisa project coincides with the National Department of Environmental Affairs' process to develop guidelines for municipalities and industry on 'measures to improve the working conditions of waste pickers'. These nationally developed guidelines are critical to creating a regulatory framework for the recognition and inclusion of waste pickers in every municipality.

However, implementation and enforcement of guidelines cannot be left to chance and must include waste picker organisations on the ground.

Sawpa formed in 2009 is recognised at the national policy development level. But, recognition of waste picker representation at city level has not been achieved.

Sawpa's presence has been more prominent among waste pickers on landfill sites than among waste pickers on the streets so waste picker organisation in cities has been fragmented. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation by buyers because the price of recyclables is unregulated.

Waste pickers are also harassed by the law because they are largely excluded from city bylaws. The authorities fail to recognise or engage with all reclaimers who are after all the founders of the informal system of collection, sorting and selling of recyclables.

Without structured forums for negotiation, the city has developed projects and programmes that endanger waste pickers' livelihoods. City officials claim that they cannot consult them because they are not organised. However, the Wisa project found that pickers are indeed organised, mainly around their means of survival and less so on improving their livelihoods and working conditions.

The Wisa project's main objective is to reverse this situation and achieve democratic waste picker representation and organisation in every city.

PROBLEM OF JO'BURG'S PRIVATISATION MODEL

While the national waste management strategy aims to improve reclaimers' working conditions, Jo'burg city's privatisation of waste management services threatens to displace waste pickers. The city is striving to achieve waste minimisation targets of 40% waste to energy, 33% composting and recycling, 20% waste reduction at source by industry and through consumer education, and 7% to landfills.

The city's policies on waste tend towards a private sector model. However, there are more socially responsible and environmentally-friendly models that are successful in developing countries like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and India.

The South African context of rising unemployment forces more and more people into informal work. So waste picking provides a source of income, easy entry and the flexibility to return to it at any time between 'piece jobs'.

The collection, sorting and separation of waste is labour intensive and provides an opportunity for job creation. With decent working conditions and skills development there is the possibility of progression into areas such as treatment, recovery,



Reclaimers meet to discuss Jo'burg city's privatisation of waste management services which has been disastrous for wastepickers.

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manufacturing and packaging in the recycling economy.

SEPARATION@SOURCE: STREET PICKERS

To achieve its waste minimisation targets by 2040 the city started a Separation@Source programme in 2009.

It began educating households on separating their waste into recyclable materials for collection by contractors. Contractors then sell the recyclables at a profit and the city also pays them to provide this waste management service.

Yet waste pickers have done the same collection, separation and sorting of recyclables for generations except they remain the 'nameless' trolley pushers on the streets. In this way they have given an environmental and public service at no cost to the city.

In August 2016 the city extended its Separation@Source programme and issued a tender to contract private companies to provide waste management services. This service was in middle and high income areas serviced by Pikitup's Randburg, Roodepoort, Midrand, Selby, Norwood and Avalon depots. The impact of this on waste pickers' livelihoods was catastrophic.

Collection from high income areas means that reclaimers get better value recyclables providing

a higher income. Pickers whose collection routes included the northern suburbs reported losses of more than half of what they used to make before residents put their recyclables into provided bags for contractors to pick up. Residents no longer put waste on the kerb-side where pickers can access it.

Of greater concern is that industry is recommending that government introduce a national separation at source programme. Industry has also recommended the continuation of labour intensive collection and separation in order to maximise job opportunities. But the city of Jo'burg has opted for the more expensive contractor model which is also less socially responsible.

SEPARATION@SOURCE: LANDFILL PICKERS

The city has developed targeted waste reduction strategies to divert as much waste as possible away from landfills. This is to save landfill air space and prevent harmful environmental effects. But this has harshly impacted on waste pickers on landfill sites.

When recyclables are separated and collected directly from source (residents, business and industry) it reduces the volume that pickers on the landfill depend on for their livelihood.



The decline in recyclables creates competition among reclaimers for waste and this often leads to violent disputes. This is especially true at the Goudkoppies landfill where about 3,000 waste pickers and unemployed residents from the surrounding informal settlements gather daily to collect recyclable material.

With growing unemployment the waste sector with no entry barriers, and relative autonomy, provides a source of income for locals and migrants alike. It is therefore unlikely that the situation will change in the near future.

ORGANISING FOR A VOICE

From 2016 the Wisa project has organised across the city's seven regions and at three of the four Pikitup landfill sites. At all landfills there were existing committees that represented workers mainly in casual engagements with the authorities. This was mainly around access to landfills and keeping harmony among reclaimers, security, and Pikitup at the landfill.

The informal settlements where the majority of pickers live serve as sites for shelter but are also strategically placed to connect reclaimers to picking and sorting points including buy-back centres where they sell material.

In these communities there are many different forms of organisation where pickers come together to organise and mobilise for action.

As a result of organising, reclaimers elected the Interim Jo'burg Reclaimers Committee to represent workers to the authorities.

The committee supported by Wiego approached the city to discuss the challenge of its Separation@Source programme. It told how the city threatens to displace trolley pushers dependent on working in the targeted areas.

Yet despite appeals to Pikitup and the city to discuss the private contracts and its impact especially on street pickers, the city announced that contracts would go ahead in July 2017. The pickers were left with no choice but to fight back to protect their livelihoods. They organised a protest march on 13 July 2017 and took legal advice from the Socio-Economic Rights Institute (SERI) on how to challenge the impact of the latest private contractor model on their livelihood.

HISTORIC RECLAIMER PROTEST

Hundreds of reclaimers took to the streets in an historic protest by waste pickers in the city. Street and landfill pickers united to fight for their livelihood. What had been a private struggle for the authorities to hear them, now drew public attention to their plight.

Key demands were for recognition as environmental agents and to be treated with respect to break the stigma that 'people think we are dirty because we work with trash'.

Waste pickers are also concerned about their health because of the exposure to hazardous conditions where they work and live. Therefore, recognition and improved working conditions is central to their livelihood struggle.

STRUGGLING FOR VISIBILITY

Ongoing organisation and the protest march, is for waste pickers a struggle for visibility as workers and entrepreneurs in the city. They want people to recognise their environmental and economic contribution and to be properly compensated instead of middlemen, who buy waste material from them before selling it to industry, exploiting them.

Their efforts paid off as the newly appointed Pikitup managing director, Lungile Dhlamini, who received the protest memorandum engaged with the pickers after the march. He acknowledged that reclaimers were principle stakeholders in the city's waste economy and deserved recognition and engagement on their livelihoods.

Since then a task team of the Interim Jo'burg Reclaimers Committee, Pikitup and the City of Jo'burg's Environment and Infrastructure Services Department has been set up to develop a framework for waste picker integration into the city's waste economy.

The main negotiation demand for waste pickers is that they should be recognised for the work they have always done and that new programmes and projects on waste management must not destroy their livelihoods.

They point out that waste pickers can save municipal spending. By diverting recyclables from landfills, they save municipalities landfill air space at no cost. Street collectors contribute further to saving municipal waste collection, transport and disposal costs. Jo'burg city's privatisation decision will cost more than working with reclaimers. The savings could be used to pay them for the public and environmental service that they provide.

Waste pickers want transparency and equal opportunity in current and future waste management projects and programmes. This can be achieved through a centralised registration system of all reclaimers.

Finally, the reclaimers' struggle is for recognition and the right to decent working conditions and social protection like other workers, and to retain their autonomy as pioneers of the informal waste management system. ^{LB}

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