

## **Executive Summary** **Waste Pickers in Durban, South Africa**

The Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) seeks to provide credible, grounded evidence of the range of driving forces, both positive and negative, that affect conditions of work in the informal economy over time in 10 cities. Three sectors are being explored: home-based work, street vending and waste picking. This report examines waste picking in Durban, South Africa.

The IEMS used both qualitative (i.e. participatory focus group methodology) and quantitative methods (survey questionnaire) to gather data on the impact of three major driving forces on waste picking in Durban. These driving forces are the macroeconomic environment, institutions (e.g. government institutions and informal workers' organizations), and value chain dynamics.

The field work for the study was conducted between August and November 2012. A total of 152 waste pickers were interviewed, and 75 of these also participated in focus group discussions. The Durban sample comprised of women and men from two location variables: those that collected waste from one point (i.e. a fixed location such as a landfill site) or those that were itinerant (i.e. collecting waste from multiple collection points). More waste pickers operating from a single collection point were sampled (55 per cent) compared with itinerant waste pickers (45 per cent). The advantage of having surveyed more waste pickers from a single location is that the IEMS contributes to a gap in the existing research on this particular sector compared to more robust research on itinerant waste pickers.

### **Findings**

The findings on household characteristics suggest that waste pickers' profits are a key source of household income. Sixty-one per cent of the respondents reported that waste picking was the main source of household income. However, there was a significant difference between male and female respondents.

Seventy-two per cent of male respondents reported waste picking as the primary source of income in contrast to only 43 per cent of women. The average household size of the respondents was 3.6 for female respondents and 2.6 for male respondents. Waste pickers (especially men) tended to live in small households, and a number of them actually reported that they were living on the streets.



*Photo: Dennis-Lee Stols*

The research revealed that the vast majority of waste pickers are own-account workers (99 per cent) and generating employment, as one in 10 respondents reported that they had at least one paid employee working for them. Although, men were more likely to have paid employees compared with women who tended to depend on more unpaid family members.

The average waste picker in the sample reported a monthly turnover of R 1,566 (US \$119), which is a very low figure given the number of hours worked by the respondents (40 hours per week on average). Male waste pickers reported a turnover that was higher with longer working hours than that of their female counterparts. Waste pickers collect and sell a wide variety of waste recyclables, and men tend to dominate the collection and sale of metals, while women dominate in the collection and sale of cardboard, paper, plastic, and glass. The gendered difference in turnover and working hours is explained by factors such as the types of recyclables sold, where men tend to sell waste that command more labour-and-time intensive processes but that have higher profits (e.g. metals), whereas women sell recyclables of lower value (e.g. cardboard) and they have to contend with household responsibilities.

Almost a quarter of the respondents add value to the waste they collect by making such things as cupboards, beds, tables, and toys. Waste pickers largely sell or are linked into the formal economy, whereby most of the waste that is collected is actually sold to formal enterprises, such as middle-agents and recycling companies with evidence of strong forward linkages for both male and female respondents (85 per cent and 90 per cent, respectively). Waste pickers service formal entities as they source their recyclables from institutions like industries and hospitals, as well as landfill sites, bins, and along the streets of commercial and residential areas.

Waste pickers are operating in an increasingly difficult economic environment that is constraining their ability to keep their enterprises viable. The most often cited problem by the survey respondents was the lack of access to waste (83 per cent). Restrictions imposed by the city authorities on the collection of waste from households, streets, and landfills all have a negative impact on waste pickers' earnings. The vast majority of waste pickers do not have permits, and in the case of landfills, waste pickers are required to negotiate with the private operators of the landfill who only issue very few permits. Another problem cited was unscrupulous behavior by middle-agents, for instance, where they pay very low prices for the waste collected. Whilst city-provided buy-back centers have helped deal with the latter, waste pickers cited the problem of having to travel long distances to sell their waste at buy-back centers (63 per cent) and the low number of buyers for the waste collected (62 per cent). In addition, 76 per cent of respondents cited competition from large companies as a major problem affecting their work. Competition from other waste pickers has also increased, with

eight in 10 respondents who said that there was more competition for collecting waste.

Access to essential basic infrastructure was identified as a critical problem – 80 per cent of waste pickers surveyed mentioned access to toilets and running water as a major problem, particularly for those operating from a single collection point such as landfill sites. In terms of work-related infrastructure, inadequate business space (84 per cent) – providing shelter from the elements for sorting, storing, and processing waste pickers' recyclables – was identified as a major problem. The issue of storage was specifically cited because if recyclables and equipment are not secured, there is a chance that they will be stolen, and theft is a serious problem that affects many waste pickers. In addition, unreliable access to equipment was cited as a problem by 82 per cent of the waste pickers, and the absence or dysfunctionality of equipment or technologies compromises their ability to collect the desired volumes of recyclables and exposes them to occupational health and safety hazards. The equipment includes trolleys for conveying recyclables more efficiently as an alternative to head-loading, protective work wear, tools for collecting and bundling recyclables (e.g. ties, bags, bailing machines to compress recyclables, collection picks), scales for measuring recyclables, and large-scale technologies such as materials recovery facilities (MRFs)<sup>1</sup> at landfill sites.

National and local government were regarded by the vast majority of waste pickers (98 per cent) as being unhelpful to their activities because for many, the only interaction they have with local government is through harassment and fines at the hands of the police. In the focus groups and interviews, the police and the municipality were identified as institutions hindering their work. Police were mentioned by six focus groups for negatively impacting their businesses by chasing away and fining trucks that dump the waste, as well as confiscating their recyclables. Harassment from local authorities or the public was cited by 78 per cent of the respondents and mentioned as one of the top three negative driving forces in waste pickers' lives by seven focus groups. Major institutional obstacles cited by the survey respondents were those of treatment by the local authority (cited by 68 per cent of respondents) and the inability to obtain a business license (52 per cent). Sixty-six per cent of waste pickers surveyed identified poor access to support centers as a problem. Many survey respondents (45 per cent) reported that regulations and municipal rules on where and when they can sell their recyclables are not clear.

The study interrogated the role of intermediaries, especially waste picker organizations and non-

---

<sup>1</sup> MRF is a specialized plant that receives, separates, and prepares recyclable materials for recycling through a combination of manual and/or mechanical sorting



governmental organizations (NGOs). The findings suggest that while there is solidarity among waste pickers, there are no prominent organizations that represent their interests. Over 3 in 10 respondents did however note that NGOs were helpful. The study concluded by exploring the waste pickers' views on their contribution to the city. Waste pickers noted that they hope to keep the city clean by collecting waste (cited by 14 FGRs), and in terms of economic contribution, creating employment (cited by eight FGRs).

In summary, the study found that waste pickers have been negatively affected by lack of access to basic and supportive sector-specific infrastructure, a harsh economic environment due to increased competition from formal and informal sectors, difficulty in accessing waste, and a largely hostile state, which is biased towards formal waste management systems. The lack of organization among the waste pickers has only exacerbated these negative forces.

"In addition, the impact of these forces has adversely affected more female waste pickers than males. For instance, not only do male respondents earn more (on average) than women, they also tend to have more paid employees/assistants and therefore have better support when unable to work compared with female respondents. There were also gender differences in the waste recyclables sold by women and men, where men dominate in the collection and sale of metals (which command higher prices), while women tend to dominate in the collection and sale of recyclables of less value (i.e. cardboard, soft plastics etc.)."

### Policy Recommendations

There are 10 recommendations that stem from this study's findings.

1. *Stop police harassment:* This could make waste pickers' earnings slightly more stable, thus reducing poverty risk at the household level. The municipality needs to investigate the conduct of the police and in parallel with suggestions outlined below, conduct a retraining program. Public awareness strategies that explain the valuable contributions of waste pickers in the recycling industry will assist in dealing with the social stigma faced generally.
2. *Review the permitting system:* The municipality, in consultation with waste pickers, clearly needs to conduct a comprehensive review of the permitting system, through a transparent and consultative process that involves waste pickers. Moving from open to sanitary landfilling is extremely important for environmental, sanitary, and human rights reasons; however, viable alternatives for waste pickers should be an integral part of any solid waste management plans and strategy. These alternatives include integration of waste pickers into systems of separation at source, door-to-door collection



Photo: A. Griffin

of recyclables, and other income-generating activities. Any restricted activity should be replaced with another of at least equal value. Equally, enabling authorized access to fixed collection points that is worker- and environmentally friendly around the city should be considered.

3. *Disseminate information about local regulations:* The municipality needs to disseminate information about regulations to waste pickers across the city.
4. *Provide basic infrastructure:* Many waste pickers do not have access to toilets and running water which is a source of concern for the health and well-being of waste pickers. In conducting the area-based assessment, priority areas where the city needs to provide these facilities should be identified.
5. *Provide supportive infrastructure, technology, and equipment:* Shelter from the elements, space for the processing of recyclables, and storage for recyclables and equipment are key to the productivity of waste pickers but also to better functioning and aesthetically pleasing urban environments. Provision of these services should be a priority. The opening of more strategically located buy-back centers and curbside collection points could go a long way in not only saving time but also improving the waste pickers' earnings, because they would not be held to selling to specific centers or middle-agents and it would increase their access to multiple and transparent sources of income.

In landfill sites, the provision of materials recovery facilities (MRFs) should be considered, which would enable waste picker groups to access and process the recyclable waste and reduce the health and safety risks. Therefore, strategies of leveraging funding for more buy-back centers, collection points, and

- infrastructure upgrades at the existing centers and MRFs need to be institutionalized within the relevant line departments, such as Durban Solid Waste, Business Support Unit, and area-based management units around the city, such as inner-Thekwini Renewal and Urban Management Programme (iTRUMP). Where resources are limited, the city can consider public private partnerships.
6. Provide business support services: There are existing support services, most notably the Small Enterprise Development Agencies supported by both the eThekwini Municipality and the national Department of Trade and Industry. These and other support centers (associated with relevant line departments, such as Business Support Unit and Durban Solid Waste) need to develop programs that specifically target the waste-picking population.
  7. Strengthen waste picker organizations: The results indicate that waste pickers are not organized, and they should be encouraged to organize themselves as member-based organizations or within committee or cooperative arrangements, which will enhance their collective agency in accessing waste and spaces to operate. Waste pickers might also gain from capacity-building programmes (including negotiation and conflict resolution skills). Therefore, more support for the emerging workers' organizations, such as those established by support organizations like Asiye eTafuleni, Wildlands Trust, groundWork and South African Waste Pickers Association, and dialogue between waste picker groups, the city, and other stakeholders need to be encouraged to achieve this.
  8. Consider sector support: Durban's Informal Economy Policy suggests a sector-based approach to the development and support of different segments within the informal economy (2002:14)<sup>2</sup>. There is no evidence that the city has implemented this approach, and it should be revisited.
  9. Consider national policy and legislative review: waste pickers in other South African cities often face similar challenges which adds impetus for a clear national vision and implementation strategy for fully realizing the economic development potential of the recycling industry. This can be done by the inclusion of waste picking within the growing global emphasis of recycling in waste management as a pillar in the green economy strategy.
  10. Inclusion of informal waste collectors within co-existent or integrated waste management strategies are needed: Currently, waste management systems are skewed towards the formal sector; however, a critique and gap analysis of formal and informal collection systems would assist in determining which sector better responds to specific waste generation trends and maximizes employment opportunities.

In conclusion, the results detail how waste pickers have been negatively affected by three main forces – the harsh macroeconomic environment, unsupportive institutions which favour privatization and outsourcing of waste management services, and a business climate characterized by increased competition in the sourcing and selling of recyclable material. The impact of these forces has not been the same for female and male waste pickers – the study shows that women seem to have borne the brunt of these forces. The results indicate that not only do male respondents earn more (on average) than women, they also tend to have more paid employees/assistants and therefore have better support when unable to work compared with female respondents. There were also gender differences in the waste recyclables sold by women and men. The results show that men dominate in the collection and sale of metals (which command higher prices), while women tend to dominate in the collection and sale of cardboard, paper, plastic, and glass.

<sup>2</sup> Accessible here: [http://www.durban.gov.za/City\\_Services/BST\\_MU/Documents/Informal\\_Economy\\_Policy.pdf](http://www.durban.gov.za/City_Services/BST_MU/Documents/Informal_Economy_Policy.pdf)



**Inclusive Cities:** Launched in 2008, the Inclusive Cities project aims to strengthen membership-based organizations (MBOs) of the working poor in the areas of organizing, policy analysis and advocacy, in order to ensure that urban informal workers have the tools necessary to make themselves heard within urban planning processes. Inclusive Cities is a collaboration between MBOs of the working poor, international alliances of MBOs and those supporting the work of MBOs.

To read the full city, sector and global reports, visit [inclusivecities.org/iems](http://inclusivecities.org/iems)