



# Include waste pickers! How to make waste management policymaking better

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# Executive Summary

Waste pickers—informal waste workers who collect and sell recyclables for a living— play a vital role in keeping cities clean, maintaining the circular economy and helping to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In South Africa, an estimated 90,000 waste pickers collect 80-90% of everything that is recycled, thereby sustaining a recycling economy that also comprises formal workers, and that is worth R15.3 billion (just under £1 billion). Waste pickers contribute to reduced landfill airspace usage, saving municipalities millions of rand while earning a livelihood for themselves.

Despite these important contributions, waste pickers are often stigmatised for their work, and excluded from the formulation and evaluation of waste management policies which impact them. Harnessing waste pickers' expertise in identifying and separating recyclable materials has the potential to increase recycling volumes in the waste management economy.

Drawing on case studies from South Africa, this policy brief identifies recommendations for how waste management policymakers across government, the private sector and the third sector can better recognise and support the contribution of waste pickers and further unlock their contribution to waste management, recycling, and sustainable development. While the focus of this brief is on South Africa, the observations and recommendations are applicable in other local, national and regional contexts.



# Introduction

## Why is this important?

Waste management is one of the grand challenges of our era. The ongoing creation of waste has affected the environment, human health and our ability to live within the resource limits of the planet on both land and water (Raworth 2017). The World Bank estimates that only 19% of the 2.01 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste generated annually is recycled (Kaza 2018).

The generation of waste throughout the economy requires that a solution to waste management be found through the coordination of multiple skills across economic sectors. The solution also necessitates stakeholder input from national and municipal governments and international and local non-state actors, including the formalised and informal private and third sectors (Mazzucato 2021; Lindner 2020). This multi-pronged approach has been recognised by the UN SDGs for various types of waste.<sup>1</sup>

The informal sector is a notably important stakeholder because waste pickers have developed expertise in the recognition of different types of plastic, paper, metals, glass, and other materials which can be converted into recycled raw material. These informal waste workers play a vital role directly—through waste-picking—and indirectly—by establishing cooperatives and creating decent jobs—to meet legislative and policy commitments to implement sustainable development and the SDGs.<sup>2</sup> Waste-pickers also play an essential role in the South African waste management economy. They collect the majority of what is recycled and save municipalities R309.2 – R748.8 million in landfill airspace per year (Godfrey et al 2016; Godfrey 2021).

### The current waste management policy landscape in South Africa

Waste pickers' actual and potential contribution to the waste management economy is increasingly recognised, however the South African waste management policy landscape is complex and multi-tiered. Responsibility for this area ultimately lies with the Department for Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE). However, the implementation of solid waste management policy is devolved to municipalities with some functions, such as the approval of landfill licences, left to the remit of the DFFE or provincial governments.

Waste picker organisations, third sector organisations and the formalised private sector entities are also involved in the development of various waste management policies either formally or informally. After much lobbying from the formal private sector, the government introduced a mandatory scheme for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) to be managed by manufacturers and retailers of packaging products in May 2021 to be implemented in 2022. These regulations govern the recycling of packaging products such as paper, plastic and cardboard which are often recycled by waste pickers. While waste pickers are recognised as integral to the management of packaging waste, the scheme will be managed by the formal private sector (s5(r) Regulations Regarding Extended Producer Responsibility 2020).

The most significant step towards recognising the important contributions of waste pickers was introduced in 2020: the *Waste Picker Integration Guideline for South Africa*. The development of this policy involved a multistakeholder process that centred the voices of waste pickers. The guideline is currently being implemented but meaningful inclusion of waste pickers remains patchy.

1 Six SDG targets are of importance here: SDG 6.3: by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, having the proportion of untreated waste water and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally; SDG 6.a: By 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity building support to developing countries in water and sanitation related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies; 11.6: By 2030, reduce the adverse per capital environmental impact of cities, including by paying attention to air quality, municipal and other waste management through their contribution to the reduction in the use of landfill space; SDG 12.3: By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses; By 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle in accordance with agreed international frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water, and soil in order to minimise their adverse impacts on human health and the environment; SDG 12.5: By 2030, antically reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse.

2 The SDG relevant to job creation here is: SDG target 8.3: by 2030, promoting development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services. The legislative commitments include to achieve sustainable development under Section 24 of the South African Constitution 1996; the National Sustainable Development Framework 2008; the National Waste Management Strategy 2020; various municipal laws, and the Preamble of the Waste Act 2008.

# What are the challenges?

## Exclusion of waste pickers from access to waste

Waste pickers continue to be excluded/restricted from access to waste. This is despite their contributions to realising South Africa's international policy commitments, their economic and environmental contribution to South African society, and the creation of a national policy to include waste pickers in the management of waste and recycling. Waste pickers often have to negotiate and renegotiate—on an individual or collective basis—access to waste with waste generators. Even when waste pickers have organised themselves into formal structures such as cooperatives, they are often excluded from (entrepreneurial and employment) opportunities that would give them regular access to waste (Lindner 2020).

## Exclusion of waste pickers from policymaking spaces because they are informal workers

Despite the creation of a *Waste Picker Integration Guideline for South Africa*, policymakers do not routinely seek out the opinion of waste picker representatives or waste picker organisations when shaping or monitoring and evaluating waste management policies. This has acted to limit waste pickers' contribution to society, the economy and the environment, and to reinforce the stigmatisation of these workers, even where they organise themselves into 'formal' collectives and representative organisations.

## Waste pickers may lack the requisite capacity to participate fully in policymaking

Many waste pickers lack the requisite capacity to participate in policymaking exercises. Many have not completed high school education, and do not speak, read or write English to a high enough standard to engage in the formal and bureaucratic processes that would permit engagement in waste-related policymaking, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities (Lindner 2020). While many industry waste management associations and other organisations actively provide waste pickers with business

skills training, it is difficult for waste pickers to engage with these programmes without a good level of prior educational attainment. This has meant that the waste pickers most likely to engage with policymaking are those who are well-educated, and whose concerns may not be representative. Many waste pickers also earn below the minimum wage, which makes it difficult for them to attend policy meetings if they are not compensated for their time (Godfrey 2021; Lindner 2020).

### CASE STUDY

## Waste Picker Inclusion

Tshwane (Pretoria) municipality entered into an agreement with a private company to build a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) in the Atteridgeville area. Construction on the site began in 2014. According to waste pickers who worked on landfills within Pretoria, including landfills at risk of closure, they were promised up to 261 jobs by the municipality at the facility once operational. However, upon the opening of the facility in November 2016, no waste pickers had yet been hired. At that point, waste campaigners had to decide on a strategy for how to convince the municipality to keep its promise to waste pickers. A process which included waste pickers' views and input in the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of this project would have identified workforce needs and how waste pickers could meet them, as well as assessed the extent to which efforts had been made to engage with and hire waste pickers.

## Divergent motivations

The divergent motivations of waste management actors, which are often in opposition or are poorly coordinated, makes the process of waste management policymaking challenging. The vast majority of waste pickers enter the waste management economy for instrumental reasons—to ensure their basic survival, and to improve their livelihoods (Lindner 2020). Private waste management actors enter the waste management economy for a variety of reasons, such as family custom, to make a profit, to improve waste pickers' livelihoods, or in the case of industry waste management associations, to represent the interests of their members (Lindner 2020). These motivations contrast with that of the government, which has to manage the interaction of actors' divergent motivations in policymaking settings, while attending to their own aim to create policies that successfully address waste management issues in compliance with national and international laws and commitments (Lindner 2020). Government, with its limited capacity to fund waste management programmes, cannot always ensure that actors comply with waste management laws and policies.

## The difficulty of policy evaluation

It is difficult to evaluate the success of policy interventions in the waste management economy. A number of factors can affect the ability to adequately evaluate policies that have no definitive end point, such as EPR (Kattel et al 2018, 18). These can include a lack of expertise and financial resources to carry out the monitoring and evaluation M&E process, and a lack of data on how the policy is being implemented. The absence of an agreement among stakeholders on what needs to be evaluated can

further complicate the process, and makes the need for periodic M&E more compelling. When done right, M&E can allow policymakers the space to change policy direction where indicated (Kattel et al 2018; Mazzucato 2021).



## CASE STUDY

### Minamata Convention on Mercury 2013

International policymakers and negotiators involved the Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining (ASGM) sector in the drafting of the Minamata Convention. Concerns regarding the ASGM were raised through Partnership Meetings involving numerous stakeholders within the Global Mercury Partnership governance structure. Recommendations based on ASGM concerns were then represented within the negotiating process. As a result, the decision was taken to address the informal mining or ASGM sector specifically and separately in the Convention because of its unique positionality. The sector supports the livelihoods of around 20

million people worldwide, and is the largest user of mercury extraction, and the largest source of mercury emissions globally (Bailey 2021). The Convention aims to support ASGM practitioners to improve working practices and to formalise them as actors within the mining economy.<sup>1</sup> The Convention Secretariat has so far assisted 43 countries out of 135 parties to create ASGM National Action Plans (NAP) focused on promoting safer mining practices and formalising the informal economy with periodic review every three years.<sup>2</sup> Sixteen NAPs have been completed since December 2021.

<sup>1</sup> Article 7 and Annex C of the Minamata Convention on Mercury 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Annex C of the Convention sets out the required elements for a National Action Plan.

# Recommendations

Addressing the exclusion of waste pickers from policymaking, as well as the limits on waste pickers' access to decent work opportunities and to recyclable materials and recycling facilities should be a priority for policymaking at local, national and international levels.

The benefits of implementing the following recommendations include stronger recognition of waste pickers' economic contributions and the facilitation of waste pickers' access to waste—and thereby the improvement of recycling rates and the socio-economic conditions of waste pickers in South Africa.

While these recommendations have been developed with the South African context in mind, practices aiming to facilitate and monitor waste picker inclusion in policymaking are likely to yield benefits in other country contexts, too.

## Local and national governments

- Should consult formally with waste picker representatives via their associations or waste picker citizenship forums when they are taking administrative or policy decisions which directly or indirectly affect waste pickers.
- Should consult with waste picker representatives in the creation of programmes which are managed by the formalised private sector that directly affect waste pickers, such as the EPR regulations. This can be done via a policymaking strategy that takes input from major stakeholders to reach consensus.
- Should integrate waste picker perspectives into their decision-making processes.
- Should provide support for waste pickers to attend policy-related meetings, such as an interpreter, and a compensatory payment for time spent engaging in policy instead of working as a waste picker.
- Should share good practice across different municipalities given the variability of policy implementation.
- Should integrate formal and periodic M&E into the policymaking process. An evaluation which focuses on user experience and the co-creation of services can provide an indication of how the policy is being implemented if complete data <sup>3</sup> is unavailable or hard to capture, and be an effective measure of inclusion.

## Local and international civil society organisations and funders (e.g. waste management associations, NGOs)

- Should prioritise supporting waste pickers to apply for jobs, as well as to access entrepreneurial and tendering opportunities including: language and literacy training; training on how to complete job applications (including CVs and cover letters); training on how to fill out paperwork to become formalised either individually or as a collective; training and ongoing support on the general and specific business skills needed to run successful waste management businesses.

## International policymakers

- South African policymakers involved in international policymaking processes which affect the work of waste pickers should include waste picker representative voices in their response to such efforts. This would follow the precedent set in the Artisanal and Small Scale Gold Mining (ASGM) sector in the creation of the Minamata Convention on Mercury and the UN Environment Assembly's ongoing work on a global treaty to end plastic pollution. Such an approach would give a voice to waste pickers in international law, and increase the likelihood that international conventions and treaties which directly affect waste pickers will have a positive effect on them/be implemented by them in a positive way.

## CASE STUDY

### Waste Picker Capacity Building

Both the RecyclePaperZA and PET Plastic Recycling South Africa (PETCO), among other waste industry associations, run successful entrepreneurship skills development programmes for waste pickers. They have provided training to thousands of waste picker-entrepreneurs on how to separate recyclable materials from 'dirty waste'; on business communication skills; on business planning, budgeting and accounting and ongoing entrepreneurial mentorship. This has resulted in a larger number of entrepreneurs in the waste management economy who are able to improve their livelihoods and access entrepreneurial opportunities within the waste management economy. However, organisations such as RecyclePaperZA and PETCO only have the capacity to train 35-50 waste pickers at a time, therefore the scope remains to scale up efforts to train waste pickers.

<sup>3</sup> This refers to data such as volumes of materials being recycled, prices paid for recyclables, number and location of all recycling points, etc.

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