

# MAKING WASTE WORK

THE SOUTH AFRICAN WASTE PICKERS' ASSOCIATION'S  
SUCCESS STORIES





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## INTRODUCTION

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The South African Waste Pickers' Association (SAWPA) was formed in 2009 following groundWork's visits to various waste dumps and towns. The aim of the visits was to map out all the waste dumps in South Africa and to further engage with waste reclaimers or pickers about securing their livelihoods. Prior to 2009, waste pickers were disorganized and conflict amongst those working on the same waste dumps was rife. The relationship between them and the municipality in charge of their dump was very hostile because the municipality did not approve of their presence at the waste dump, therefore security tightened the screws to make sure they did not enter the dump site. groundWork encouraged waste pickers to work as cooperatives, since working in this way has many advantages, such as enabling government to speak to an organized grouping rather than an individual and gaining funding and financial assistance. It is always easier to fight for one's rights as a group – and specifically a cooperative in this case – and this led to many waste pickers understanding the necessity of becoming organized and forming cooperatives.

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## STAGES OF WASTE COOPERATIVE FORMALISATION

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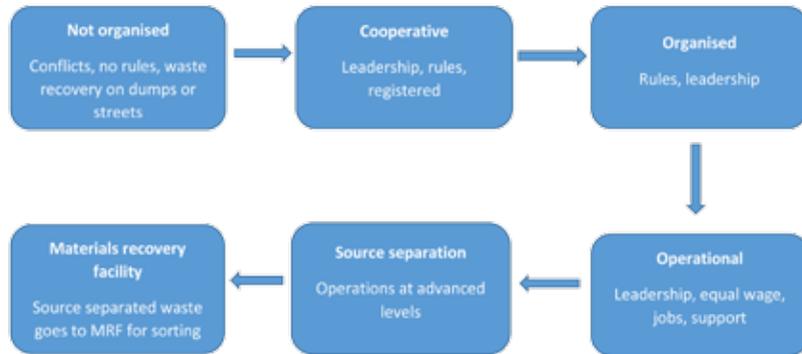
As a result of this critical work on the ground, waste pickers started to organize towards creating waste recycling cooperatives at their dumps and on the streets in different towns. These cooperatives are at different stages: some are still in negotiations and others are registered, recognised and operational. Some groups have yet to organize themselves. The stage at which each group is, is determined by the will of the waste pickers and is additionally influenced by the strength of the local leadership of waste pickers. At all levels within SAWPA – locally, regionally,

provincially and nationally – leadership committees are elected by the member waste pickers.

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### PHASES FOR WASTE PICKERS ON VARIOUS LOCALITIES

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### PROJECTS ON THE GROUND

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SAWPA has been in negotiations about their recognition with government at all levels. Since they received recognition nationally, this has been taken up in some areas in a manner that has resulted in new collaborative projects on the ground. There are various projects in which SAWPA members are involved. SAWPA does not have enough experience in working in a formal environment, so therefore all these projects are called pilots projects because there are lessons to be learned from these projects.

The main aim of these projects is to see job creation through recycling in South Africa. Recycling should be driven by a cooperative of waste pickers not by certain individuals; in other words, waste recycling must not be privatised. Privatisation leads to many challenges such as exploitation and loss of livelihoods. The model that SAWPA believes in is a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF), which is a formal facility specifically designed for the sorting and baling of waste materials.

Following are initiatives by waste pickers who are either working in cooperatives or are funded to work as cooperatives doing recycling in their localities. Many of these groups of waste pickers have come a long way from being disorganized to being a formal, registered cooperative.

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### EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE AMATHOLE DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY VUSANANI ENVIRONMENTAL PROJECT PRIMARY COOPERATIVE

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This is a one-year-old MRF built by Buyisa ebag on behalf of Amathole District Municipality. It is, however, managed and operated by the Vusanani Environmental Project Primary Cooperative, located at the Eastern Cape Regional Solid Waste Site located next to Ibika township outside the town of Butterworth. The waste dump opened its gates in the last ten years, while the MRF started operations at the beginning of 2014. The landfill is privately owned by Wasteman, while the MRF is operated by the cooperative. This is a regional waste dump for all the local municipalities under the district. The local municipal waste dumps that have transfer centres feeding into the MRF at the waste dump are Great Kei, Mnquma, Mnqushwa, Nkonkobe and Nxuma.



*Members of the Vusanani Environmental Project Primary Cooperative in front of the MRF.*  
 PHOTO: GROUNDWORK

The district municipality sourced funding to build an MRF to service the district and it became operational this year. The Vusanani Environmental Project Primary Cooperative has ten members who operate from the MRF and from various waste sources such as shopping centres and on the streets of various local towns. This MRF only takes sorted waste from businesses in town and they don't recover from the waste dump. The members of this cooperative are further registered at the Department of Public Works to guarantee them a daily wage which will add further financial security if there are times when the MRF is under performing.

The project does not take all recyclable material from the general waste stream due to the lack of the markets in the region. It is mainly cardboard that is collected so that it can be sent to a local paper mill. There is also no recovery of waste from the waste dump. In other words, the MRF is located next to the waste dump, but there are no waste pickers who collect recyclables here. A privately-owned company, Mpact, provides transport of the

waste pickers' recycling materials to recycling businesses. Their collection starts from the source and they process clean material. The market has proven to be a big challenge for this MRF, but this could be linked to the town in which the MRF is located.

The cooperative operates from Monday to Friday and they make approximately ten bales of compacted cardboard per day, each bale weighing about 400 kilograms. One ton of cardboard is worth R850. The members of the cooperative are paid out for the number of hours or days they work. They sell the load every two months and their income is subsidised by R70 per day through a public works programme.



*Bales of compacted cardboard produced by the waste pickers at the MRF.*  
 PHOTO: GROUNDWORK

This MRF is highly mechanised and is the first of its kind in the country to be operated by a cooperative of waste pickers. This cooperative is very fortunate when compared to the majority of other waste picker cooperatives in the country. The agreement between the cooperative and Amathole District Municipality to operate the MRF is renewed every two years. The tools that are

at the recycling centre are an H25 baling machine, an H15 baler that can bale 450 kilograms, one bottle crusher, cages, platform scale and trolleys. This machinery shows the growth potential for the MRF.

To extend their market reach, the cooperative is planning to establish connections with more buyers of the different products that they collect. While they mainly collect and sell cardboard, they also collect electronic waste or e-waste, such as old computers and TVs, which is currently kept on site while the market is being sourced. The other waste stream that they collect is bottles and they have a bottle crushing machine introduced by municipality. There remains, however, no market for this type of recyclable.

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**KWAZULU NATAL PROVINCE  
UMGUNGUNDLOVU DISTRICT  
MUNICIPALITY  
MOOI RIVER RECYCLING COOPERATIVE**

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This project had humble beginnings. This is a cooperative of waste pickers who have a history of working for nothing due to the distance from the market. The Mooi River Recycling Cooperative, their name coming from their place of work, sells their recyclables in Pietermaritzburg which is seventy kilometres away from the town of Mooi River. Mooi River is a small rural town with one or two factories and is basically a one street town.

In 2007, the waste pickers had been working as individuals collecting different types of recyclables. At this time there were no tools for recovery and compacting the recyclable materials and as a result they would pick waste, pay to hire a truck to send their recyclables to the market and basically end up only covering the transport fee.

In 2008, groundWork started encouraging them to work in pairs and teams if possible. groundWork offered free transport for a period of time for the group in order to facilitate that a small income begin to flow in for the waste pickers. Then they started to sell consistently until the materials buyer made them a better offer; better than local waste pickers who travel less than five kilometres to sell.



*Members of the Mooi River Recycling Cooperative in front of the old shelter housing the baling machine.* PHOTO: WEINSTEIN FAMILY

The total number of people who worked as individuals was between fifteen and twenty. All the waste pickers operating at the Mooi River waste dump were mainly recycling cardboard, plastic, bottles and paper. The majority were women. In fact, in most waste dumps it is women who compose the majority of waste pickers. Despite all the challenges, at least the market became and continues to be secure for this cooperative. Since

they started selling consistently it became clear to the majority that they have actually created employment for themselves. Their confidence grew and now they are working closely with groundWork and together we have started knocking on different doors for various support.

The project moved from being informal and individualistic to becoming a registered cooperative of ten people. The cooperative received training from various government departments and has received support from the Mpofana Local Municipality, uMgungundlovu District Municipality (UMDM) and groundWork. The cooperative has become more democratic. Working conditions have improved drastically from working under a dilapidated shelter to a formal brick structure constructed using UMDM funds. This houses the electrified MRF with a baling machine and an office.

In 2010, the Mooi River Recycling Cooperative was awarded a Seed Award from United Nations Environmental Programme under the Reclaiming Livelihood banner as one of the best recycling initiatives in the country. In 2013, the Provincial Department of Environmental Affairs, as a consequence of the Mooi River Recycling Cooperative's existence, awarded the Mpofana Local Municipality for being the greenest municipality in the province. The project has received wide recognition and SAWPA takes pride in this project. This is a classic example of a true people's project: a project that benefits everyone who is both a worker and a shareholder. The Mpofana Local Municipality also takes pride in this project because real, sustainable jobs are being created without them spending anything. The cooperative's future plan is to implement separation-at-source by getting all the recyclables from businesses in town, later moving on to middle-income households. Eventually, the hope is that everyone in Mooi River will be separating their waste in terms of dry and wet waste.



*Mooi River Recycling Cooperative loading a truck with bales of cardboard to be taken to the market.*

*PHOTO: GROUNDWORK*

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**KWAZULU NATAL PROVINCE  
UMGUNGUNDLOVU DISTRICT  
MUNICIPALITY  
HLANGANANI MA-AFRICA RECYCLING  
COOPERATIVE**

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Since the 1990s, about 300 waste pickers in the uMgungundlovu District Municipality have operated on the waste dump. Then, they were mostly suffering because the municipality did not really allow them to be on site, denying the waste pickers their livelihood. Waste recycling gradually became one of the streams in the economy and we have continually seen recycling businesses emerging.

groundWork tried to engage with waste pickers here between 2007 until 2008, and that is when they agreed to work with us. Witnessing the waste pickers being chased off the waste dump, groundWork started to talk to them about this and we made it clear that organization into group would mean these acts would decrease and negotiating with the municipality would be made easier and more meaningful.

groundWork supported the waste pickers in talking to the municipality; the waste pickers were subsequently allowed to be on site and recover materials but in a more organized manner. The municipality has further been advised by groundWork to document everyone working on the site for statistical records. This was positive as both the district and local municipality started recognising the existence of the waste pickers.

In 2010, uMgungundlovu District Municipality applied for funding from the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA) to construct a MRF. At this time the waste pickers had already formed a cooperative called Hlanganani ma-Africa Recycling Cooperative, with seventy-

four members earmarked to work on the new MRF, all of whom would become the beneficiaries if funding was given. CoGTA gave a total of R10 million to build the MRF and a further R11 million for a composting facility. The challenge started when the local and district municipalities did not agree with each other. The MRF was going to be constructed at the New England Road waste dump, which is on Msunduzi Local Municipality land, but has been delayed since 2010.

The main cause of delay to the project is the inability of the district and local municipalities to agree on the project. The members of Hlanganani ma-Africa Recycling Cooperative have been formally registered and are trained, ready to work. Most of them have been working on the waste dump for more than ten years and it is their hope that the project will take place as it will mean safer working conditions and potentially an increase in income. Like the Sasolburg project, the MRF has been supported by the Department of Environmental Affairs, but it is unclear as to what commitments the department has made.

Another problem is that Msunduzi Local Municipality has, in the meantime, signed a contract with a private waste collector, Wildlands Conservation Trust, to collect recyclables from waste pickers and pay them with vouchers. Recently, the stakeholders convened a meeting to discuss the issue of Wildlands and the MRF project. It was resolved that the project will continue despite the challenges that it is facing. The district municipality has ordered the local municipality to withdraw the contract it has with Wildlands. The decision to agree by the local municipality is still pending. The cooperatives has been promised a number of tools for this project, such as a truck, MRF, baling machine and scales, and it was discussed that the MRF can operate on two shifts as long as they will break even when they sell the product.

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**FREE STATE PROVINCE  
FEZILE DABI DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY  
IKAGENG AND DITAMATI RECYCLING  
COOPERATIVE**

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Sasolburg waste dump had waste pickers in 2007 when groundWork paid them a visit. The waste pickers were also working as individuals and the waste dump was dominated by conflicts amongst waste pickers over recyclables. groundWork convened a meeting with them and explained the benefits of working together as a group and, as a result, two cooperatives were formed, namely Ikageng and Ditamati, and were divided into males and females. They both agreed to collect and sell collectively, and the money each member earned tripled as a result. This is because cooperatives sell recyclables in bulk, making more money and more dividends for each member. In 2008 and 2009, Sasolburg was a model project for SAWPA.

Unfortunately, conflicts over money ensued and the campaign collapsed, with the municipal government and public knowing about this ground-breaking project. There was a breakup between these two cooperatives and a further breakdown into individuals. groundWork, however, further continued to support the waste pickers in Sasolburg. It was clear that the lifespan of the waste dump was coming to an end and alternatives had to be found. Therefore, PACSA (the Packaging Council of South Africa) and SAWPA started negotiations after an international trip, and the Vaalpark project was born.

The Vaalpark source separation project is an initiative between SAWPA and PACSA. In 2011 an international trip to Brazil by PACSA and SAWPA led to the initiation of this project, as Brazil has many waste pickers doing similar projects. This project is at an advanced stage after two years of preparation

for implementation. Waste legislation in South Africa compels industries to have their own Industry Waste Management Plans and give meaning to those plans. In an attempt by PACSA to implement the plan that they submitted to the minister, they decided to assist recycling of the products they use and they discovered that people at the grassroots level are the main reclaimers of their materials. Both associations agreed to have a pilot project somewhere in the country and SAWPA national leadership agreed as well that it should be Sasolburg.

Part of SAWPA's goal is to formalise projects in order to be at the front of the line and therefore the Vaalpark project was a dream come true for the Sasolburg waste dump. PACSA invited more and more of its stakeholders to this project and most stakeholders were committed to the success of the project. The land has been secured, trolleys, bins and trucks have either been sourced or have already been purchased. The next steps for the project are the formal launch, and then the education and awareness campaign can start.



*Vaal Park project offices and cooperative members.*

*PHOTO: GROUNDWORK*



6 000 wheely bins for Vaal Park project.

PHOTO: GROUNDWORK

In Vaalpark there are 3 000 households who the project will benefit by taking recyclable waste from them. Each household will receive a free wheeled bin, one for recyclables and another one for non-recyclables. Waste pickers will divide the work amongst themselves and the cooperatives that are working at the waste dump have subsequently combined to form one cooperative under the name Ikageng and Ditamati with twenty-one members. The project operatives will work from Monday to Friday. Some waste pickers will have to cover six roads, walking about six kilometres per day, while others will sort and bale the material at the Vaalpark recycling centre.

There are still issues though that need to be dealt with, such as establishing a growing market and paving the recycling centre, which was committed to by the Fezile Dabi District Municipality. The delay in the implementation of the project is also a challenge because the cooperative still operates under harsh dump site conditions. Some of the other stakeholders feel the project should sell their recyclables to the local formal recycler while the cooperative wants to sell directly to the market as per the

agreement initially between SAWPA and PACSA. Taking the approach of the former would mean going against SAWPA's goal to cut out "middlemen" in the waste recycling process.

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**GAUTENG PROVINCE  
TSHWANE METROPOLITAN  
MUNICIPALITY  
ONDERSTEPSPOORT WASTE RECYCLING  
PROJECT**

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This is a SAWPA recycling cooperative project, constituted mainly by youth, based just outside Pretoria in Onderstepoort and falling under the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. Due to waste pickers in this region having been organized since the mid-2000s, they have developed a good working relationship with the municipality and other departments relevant to their work. Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality usually holds regional meetings circulating amongst waste dumps.

The cooperative has an advantage due to their geographic location close to the main offices of government departments and industries. Therefore accessing information is not as high a mountain to climb as in the other regions. They collect cardboard, plastic, paper, glass and metals, but unfortunately they sell to middlemen so their own profits are less than what they could be.

Onderstepoort waste dump has more than 200 waste pickers on site but only thirty-six agreed to form a cooperative after SAWPA advised them to do this. In 2012, the cooperative of waste pickers on this site applied for funding with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), and they received enough money to buy themselves a truck, scale and baling machine. The DTI has once visited the waste dump and handed over their sponsorship of the cooperative directly to the waste pickers. The waste pickers

at this waste dump are organized, there are rules and suspensions if the rules have been violated.



*Waste pickers protesting against the proposed private incinerator at Chloorkop waste dump.*

*PHOTO: GROUNDWORK*



*Onderstepoort cooperative receiving sponsor.*

*PHOTO: GROUNDWORK*

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## CONCLUSION

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It is clear that the various cooperatives are at different stages. There are activities that are taking place in some localities, such as negotiations with municipalities about recognition of waste pickers and the need for recycling. This short report covered only those that we, as groundWork and SAWPA, are aware of and that are considered as SAWPA pilots projects, where lessons are learned by SAWPA members. In some localities there are no such projects taking place, despite the visits and talks done by SAWPA and groundWork.

The main reason for promoting recycling through cooperatives is because recycling has many advantages over burying waste on open land. Waste disposal is no longer an ultimate goal, rather waste minimisation and avoidance are very important.



SEPARATION  
AT  
SOURCE  
SUPPORT  
ZERO-WASTE

