

United we progress, divided we fall

A waste picker's guide to organizing



groundWork

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Introduction

Are you a waste picker, reclaimer or recycler? Do you want to fight for your rights to a decent livelihood? Do you want to work together with and support others who do the same work as you? Is the municipality listening to you or the municipality threatening your job? Do people you sell to exploit you? Do you feel used by waste buyers? Do you feel unsafe at your place of work? Are you not allowed to work where you are?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then this booklet will help you make progress towards finding solutions to and ways of dealing with these problems.

How to use this booklet

This booklet is a guide that is aimed at all waste pickers who face challenges where they work, focusing particularly on those working on landfill sites, although street pickers are mentioned briefly throughout. It is a brief look at what organizing of waste pickers is and the benefits organizing may provide people working in this sector of the South African economy. It can be used by any waste picker who is interested in solving problems that they and the waste pickers they work with may have where they work.

Groups of waste pickers can use it to help them discuss and understand their situation and their rights. They can use it to gain ideas on how to organize themselves so that they can speak with a strong voice to landfill managers, local authorities, buyers and others that affect working conditions and incomes of waste pickers. Lastly, this booklet will also help waste pickers to link up with the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) and supportive local and international NGOs.

In this booklet, the term 'organising' or to be 'organised' means to coordinate waste pickers in a more structured way that serves to better facilitate communication, gathering and other activities, in order that waste pickers with common understanding and ways of working do this as a collective.

Who are groundWork and the South African Waste Pickers Association?

This booklet has been developed by groundWork, under the NGO's Waste Campaign of which one of its focus areas is waste pickers. The SAWPA is a voluntary association of waste pickers collecting recyclable waste materials on the streets and landfill sites and then selling this waste to earn an income. Women in Informal Employment Globalising and Organising (WIEGO) is an international NGO working with organising informal workers, including waste pickers. groundWork, together with SAWPA and WIEGO, work to assist waste pickers to become better organised and in this way, to further formalise the waste picking sector to protect waste pickers' rights and to keep the control of this sector in the hands of those that do the work.

groundWork is an environmental justice organization working with community people from around South Africa, and increasingly Southern Africa, on environmental justice and human rights issues focusing on Air Quality, Climate and Energy Justice, Waste and Environmental Health. groundWork is the South African member of Friends of the Earth International, which is the world's largest grassroots environmental network. Through the organisation's Waste Campaign, groundWork has been instrumental in the development and formalisation of SAWPA from 2007 and the two groups continue to work closely to promote waste picking as a sustainable livelihood for many. At the first national meeting in Johannesburg in 2009, 100 waste pickers from seven provinces came together to begin developing a draft formal Constitution and Code of Conduct for SAWPA which will be finalised and adopted by 2014.

Alone, we must carry the whole burden by ourselves...



What is waste picking?

“We are all here at the landfill or on the streets with a purpose of making money so that we can take care of our families”. Douglas Maphumulo, a waste picker at the New England Road landfill site in Pietermaritzburg, explains the work he and thousands of other people are involved in across South Africa. Those waste pickers based on landfill sites work on the surface of the landfill, picking through dumped waste to find recyclable material. Street pickers operate on the streets by moving from house to house or business premises to collect recyclable material to sell them at the buyback centres.

“We reclaim and recover different types of waste material and sell it to someone who can give a decent price. The materials we collect could be plastics, cardboard, paper, metal and/or glass. We do this work because

... while together we can achieve so much more!



there are no job opportunities available to us. Sometimes we are forced by our circumstances to work here. Not only are we divided according to the types of waste we reclaim, we are unfortunately also sometimes divided by gender, language and nationality. The divisions amongst us often cause trouble and disunity because there are constant fights”.

These statements are most likely common to many, if not all, waste pickers at some stage and many of the issues described here may be as a result of a lack of organising.

During our visits to about 100 out of more than 600 landfill sites found in towns throughout South Africa, we observed about 12 000 waste pickers working on these sites. This does not include the many waste pickers who work on the streets, more commonly known as street pickers. Due to the lack of employment opportunities in the country, waste pickers have found a way of legally earning a living. As part of our experience

of talking with waste pickers, we found that most waste pickers work as individuals or in small groups at various landfill sites in the country and this creates challenges for them.

Not only is waste picking self-sustainable but it also helps to improve the environment. By recycling these materials, they are kept off the landfill site and increase the life-span of the existing landfill. This means that less waste is dumped on the earth. By extending the life of the landfill, the waste pickers save the municipality money. The fact that municipalities no longer need to spend money on land and construction of as many landfill sites means they save money. Also, many women work as waste pickers to support their families.

Challenges encountered by waste pickers

Whether working on a landfill or picking waste on the street, waste pickers face a variety of challenges on a daily basis. Some such problems are:

- Lack of unity amongst waste pickers means other waste pickers are viewed as opponents with whom to compete for recyclable material.
- Lack of proper waste management practiced by local and district municipalities at landfill sites.
- Unfair and inconsistent prices from buyers of collected waste.
- No guarantee of regular income from waste picking as a livelihood.
- Municipal officials ignore waste pickers' problems and generally treat them unfairly.
- Fights and failure to obey the municipality's rules or those decided upon by waste pickers due to weak or informal leadership structure.
- Dangerous working conditions which compromise waste pickers' lives and livelihoods. These hazards include:
 - fires on landfills;

- uncontrolled activities by waste pickers themselves or by external individuals or groups;
- noise and air pollution that leads to waste pickers becoming ill;
- illnesses resulting from chemical and medical waste being dumped on landfills illegally;
- overcrowding on a landfill; and
- children, the elderly and disabled people picking waste.
- Measuring scales do not always weigh waste consistently.
- Treatment of waste pickers as insignificant, despite making valuable contributions to businesses and the environment.

Where groundWork has observed waste pickers that are organised, these challenges are more likely to be solved. In instances like Sasolburg (Free State Province), and Pietermaritzburg and Mooi River (KwaZulu Natal Province), where waste pickers have become organized, we have seen that there have been many benefits such as greater cooperation with the municipality, financing for projects by various government departments and funders, a supportive relationship with NGOs, and even an increase in the collection of recyclable materials.

What rights do waste pickers have?

As citizens of South Africa, waste pickers are entitled to those rights that are enshrined in our country's Bill of Rights as found in the Constitution (1996). These rights affirm the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom that we all strive for in a democratic South Africa. Here are some important rights to remember:

- *Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.* Waste pickers have a right to respect and dignity at and outside their place of work, and to be free from judgement and unfair treatment based on race, class, nationality and gender.

- *Everyone has the right to life.* Waste pickers have a right to not have their lives threatened or to be killed.
- *Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion.* Waste pickers have a right to have their beliefs and opinions heard and respected by those they work with at and outside their place of work.
- *Every citizen has the right to choose their trade, occupation or profession freely.* Waste pickers have a right to their livelihood as waste pickers and to sell their labour and materials to the individual or business they choose.
- *Everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being.* Waste pickers have a right to place of work that does not endanger their life or ability to earn a living.
- *Everyone has the right to freedom of association.* Waste pickers have a right to connect or join with any individual or group they choose.

Ways of interacting with the municipality

Waste pickers should work towards establishing a good working relationship with landfill site municipal staff, as groundWork has observed that a bad relationship between the municipality and waste pickers does not help either group. groundWork has observed cases where municipalities have tried in vain to chase waste pickers off landfill sites and others have even spent millions of rands erecting high fences to keep waste pickers off landfill sites, without success.

Waste pickers and municipalities need to work together because waste pickers are servicing the public and the municipality by recovering recyclable waste from landfill sites and the streets, which would otherwise increase the amount of waste at landfill sites and decrease the longevity of the landfill site. It is possible that if waste pickers have positive interactions

with the municipality it may become easier for waste pickers to organise and formalise with the support of the municipality. Whilst it is important to establish this good relationship, it is not necessarily to rely too heavily on the municipality.

The project at the Mpofana landfill site in Mooi River is a classic example of waste pickers receiving full support from the municipality and as a result of this successful relationship and the entrepreneurial skills of the waste pickers, the project was awarded the United Nation's Environmental Programme's (UNEP) Seed Award in 2010.

The Waste Act

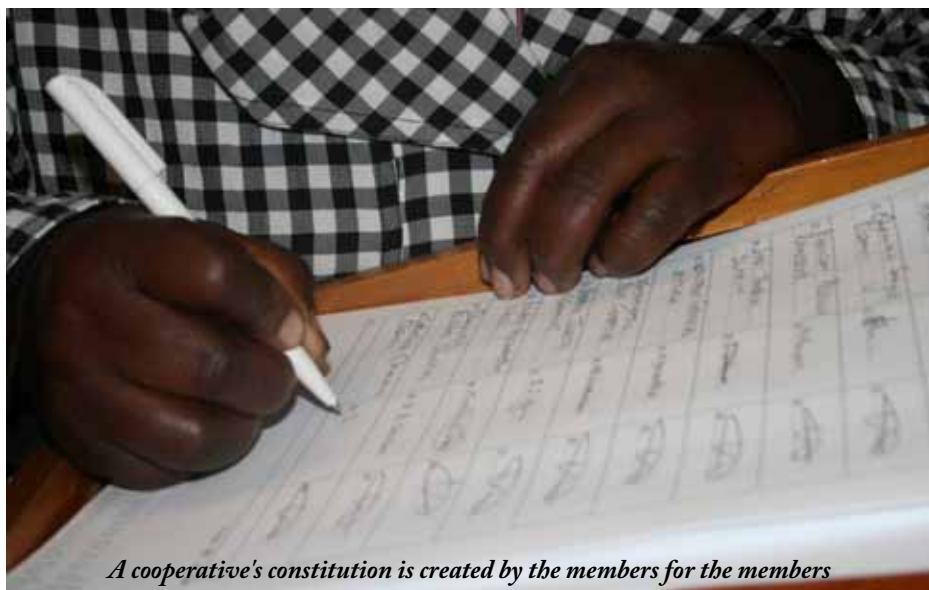
Since 2007, waste pickers and groundWork have been working together to ensure that the South African government recognises waste pickers as part of the economy of the country in the Waste Act. In 2008, the National Environmental Management Act: Waste Act (Act no, 59 of 2008) was developed to guide and enforce waste management in South Africa. It was enforced in 2009. Following this, the Department of Water and Environmental Affairs established the National Waste Management Strategy in 2011 to provide a method to achieve the Waste Act.

groundWork and waste pickers have been involved in various parliamentary hearings concerning the Waste Act and waste pickers inclusion in it. Together the rights of waste pickers have been furthered and recognition gained. Sect 51.1.(i) of the Waste Act states 'if applicable, the conditions in terms of which salvaging of waste may be undertaken' which is understood to mean waste pickers who 'salvage' recyclable materials. This clause can be used to guarantee waste pickers existence on landfills or on the streets of South Africa. To remain in compliance with the Waste Act, municipalities need to consult with waste pickers in order to establish bylaws governing conditions in which waste reclaiming may take place.

A step by step guide for organizing waste pickers

Step 1: Speaking with waste pickers

- a. Identify problematic issues where you work, whether on a landfill or streets.
- b. Speak to those individuals or groups who you work with about these issues to hear their views and work towards finding solutions.
- c. Identify municipal officials that work at your landfill by visiting the local municipal offices or supervisor at the landfill.
- d. Inform people that you talk to that these problems can be solved by working together.
- e. Speak to those waste pickers you work with and the municipal official about the processes of formalising waste pickers and the benefits of this.
- f. Call a mass meeting with the assistance of municipal officials so that all waste pickers you work with can be involved. Municipal officials may oppose this but that should not discourage moving forward with organising a peaceful mass meeting.



A cooperative's constitution is created by the members for the members

- g. Decide whether it is going to be inside landfill or outside depending on your relationship with the municipality.

Step 2: Holding a mass meeting with waste pickers

- a. Introduce issues and let people identify any more issues.
- b. Discuss potential solutions to these challenges.
- c. Document in writing everything that is said. It is important to keep this as a record to refer back to in the future.
- d. Emphasise the need to be organized as waste pickers. Suggest a motion to organize and get their views give them advantages.
- e. Invite volunteers to organize with you or invite hands for nomination of people who the group think will make up an effective organising committee. Run the election by counting the number of hands and disclose those that are elected – this is now the elected committee of waste pickers who will help in the process of organizing.
- f. Assure those not elected that they still have a voice within the organized group of waste pickers.
- g. Have the elected committee introduce themselves.
- h. Adjourn the meeting by thanking everyone for coming and setting a date for the next meeting.

Step 3: Working as the elected committee

At this stage, the democratically elected committee is still a loose group of people and further steps now need to be taken to start working towards better organisation of waste pickers at the landfill site or street.

The role of the committee as a whole is to organise waste pickers generally, and more specifically, to arrange mass meetings (see Step 2) and register waste pickers working on the landfill site, hold committee meetings to discuss issues, arrange meetings with the municipality and other stakeholders such as the Department of Social Development and the Department of Economic Development and Tourism, communicate with SAWPA representatives for support, and begin developing a local Constitution and Code of Conduct.

- a. After the mass meeting, begin by registering those that work at the landfill site or who have been part of the initial meeting. Do this by taking down names, contact numbers and addresses, which will be recorded for future communication purposes. This forms a database that also helps the committee to understand how many people they represent and the local and district municipalities would be interested in how many people are working as waste pickers in their jurisdiction.
- b. Introduce SAWPA in the first or second meeting to the waste pickers at mass meetings. At every meeting, it is important to discuss SAWPA issues so that the waste pickers achieve an understanding of who SAWPA is, the Constitution and Code of Conduct. It is very important that the leadership link and work with other organizations as well, for example organizations involved in development of the local community that most waste pickers come from. It is important to link with other organizations so that if, for instance, the municipality locks the gate against waste pickers, support can come not only from fellow members but from other organizations as well.



There are enough recyclables for all waste pickers to earn a living

- c. Meet as a committee once a week or fortnight (this depends on the committee's needs) to discuss issues that affect waste pickers working at the landfill site. Issues may arise that need to be dealt with as a committee and then discussed further at the next mass meeting. For example, some members might not have identity documents, elderly and disabled waste pickers may not be receiving any government social grants, and there may be children who work at the landfill site instead of attending school.
- d. Report such issues to relevant government departments or municipality officials. Once the committee begins helping the member waste pickers, they will begin to gain trust and respect from the organized group of waste pickers.
- e. Communicate with SAWPA representatives in other provinces and share ideas and experiences in order to gain more knowledge and other ways of solving challenges. SAWPA is also available to assist with some of the issues that are beyond the understanding of the local coordinator or waste picker leadership. The committee's ability to address issues that arise and the way in which they go about solving these problems, will show the members the type of leadership and level of commitment of the leaders.
- f. Begin developing a Constitution and Code of Conduct as the committee and with the group of organised waste pickers. Refer to the SAWPA Constitution and Code of Conduct (2010) to guide the development of local documents. The constitution will help to outline the roles and responsibilities of different committee members.

The committee needs to remain linked to the people on the ground. Whenever members have a problem at their place of work they should feel comfortable in bringing their issues to the committee. If the issues are being discussed and decisions are democratically taken this means the organization is maturing.

Benefits of organizing

If the waste pickers are organized they are more likely to achieve the goals that they set for themselves. Rules that are set and followed properly will enable waste pickers to be safer at work and possibly collect more materials. Waste pickers will be less vulnerable to losing their livelihoods. Problems that they encounter are more easily solved through the leadership structures and with the support of the collective group of waste pickers. Government listens more to organized workers than to those that are not. People also work better together if they have a common understanding and objective.

Collective bargaining is one of the many benefits of working together as a team or in a cooperative. Prices for the recyclables sold can be collectively negotiated with the buyer. If the municipality introduces some rules against waste picking, waste pickers can bargain collectively instead of having to resist as individuals. In these ways, we have observed, that the rights of the waste pickers are increasingly promoted and exploitation by middlemen is more likely to come to an end if workers are organised as a unit.

Success stories so far

In the KwaZulu Natal Province, in Pietermaritzburg and Mooi River, there have been two achievements made by waste pickers, for waste pickers. In Pietermaritzburg, a group of eighty waste pickers, called the Hlanganani MaAfrika Waste Picker Cooperative, secured R10 million from the KwaZulu Natal Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) for the construction of a materials recovery facility (MRF) on the New England Road landfill site.

The Mooi River Waste Pickers Cooperative, which is made up of ten waste pickers, were given R600 000 by the uMgungundlovu District Municipality to build a MRF at the Mpofana Local Municipality landfill site. This was achieved with the support of local and district municipal officials and Central Waste Paper, and the construction of the new MRF was completed at the end of 2012.

The construction of a MRF at the Vaalpark Recycling Centre will kick off in early 2013. This is as a result of the efforts of the Sasolburg Cooperative Recycling Initiative, in the Free State Province, who now have the support of SAWPA, Metsimaholo Municipality, Coca-cola, and the Packaging Council of South Africa (PCSA).

Also in the Free State, the Mangaung Recycling Cooperative, which works at the south and north landfills in Bloemfontein, is currently implementing a new project with the assistance of the Department of Environmental Affairs and SAWPA. This project is a manual MRF which is different to the previously spoken about projects in other areas in the country, where machine-based MRFs are being proposed.

SAWPA was instrumental in promoting waste picking at the United National Convention on Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC) 17th Conference of the Parties (CoP17) held in Durban in December 2011. SAWPA and waste pickers made them known at the Global Day of Action, which is a march held during the annual CoP led mainly by civil society organisations. SAWPA has received recognition by the South African government and the international network of waste pickers. And of course, the Waste Act (2008) recognises waste reclaiming as a livelihood for people.

Due to the organised nature of SAWPA, national meetings have been held at least once a year since 2009 for members to share information and ideas in different languages and to learn from each other's experiences.

Conclusion

Where waste pickers have worked together in cooperation they have been able to achieve many positive outcomes. If we fail to work together as waste pickers, progress will be slow and the challenges we face may not be resolved. It is up to us to build and strengthen the industry in which we work. We all see the value in waste, but unnecessary competition for waste must not divide us – we need to work together and share this resource to increase the number of those working as waste pickers.

With the help of this guide, waste pickers can move towards becoming better organized in more formalized structures in the areas in which they work so that waste picking can continue to be a people-driven source of employment, boosting local economies and helping to curb pollution.



The construction of the MRF at Mooi River landfill site will help waste pickers recycle more



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**Women in Informal Employment:
Globalizing and Organizing**

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